MIR KHALID

JAFFNA STREET

TALES OF LIFE, DEATH, BETRAYAL AND SURVIVAL IN KASHMIR

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Dr Mir Khalid was born in 1974 in a prominent civil services' family from downtown Srinagar. He attended the city's prestigious Irish Catholic Burn Hall School before training in medicine. His clinical research has appeared in the British Journal of Surgery.

Jaffna Street is his first foray into English non-fiction writing. Previously he has published an anthology of Urdu poetry, *Asbaat Khudi* (2011). He, along with his family, currently lives in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where he is employed as a general surgeon. His next literary foray is a novel dealing with blighted human relationships.

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RUPA

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Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
—Wilfred Owen
'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo'

Dedicated to my dad
Mir Nazir
(October 1941–November 2011)
the quintessential downtown Srinagar lad, who embodied and helped me appreciate the humanity, resilience and Byronic streaks of the downtown streets in equal measure
and
Ms Neeru Kaul
cherished friend and fellow author, whose surreal originality always leaves me befuddled, and whose constant prodding and editing critiques saw me sit down and take the craft of writing seriously.

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Foreword

Kashmir, the vale, my home, has remained one place where one could avoid anything but being political. In the early 1980s, on crisp spring and summer mornings, I would walk on the lush green lawns of the Kashmir University every day, making my way to the chemistry department from my hostel room, whose window faced the mystifying three peaks of Zabarwan Hills. But as I remember, three-odd decades on, even then my mind was bedeviled with an all-consuming Kashmir conundrum that would linger from discussions with fellow students hailing from virtually every nook and corner of the Valley.

I grew up in the 1960s in South Kashmir at a time when every side-turn and shopfront doubled as gathering spots where constant talk of plebiscite filled the air. The streets would often have overwhelming processions demanding self-rule. Any disturbance anywhere in the world would turn into an issue of protest against the occupation of Kashmir by an external power.

The perception that the early 1980s were times of tranquility and relative prosperity with Kashmir as a settled issue or so according to the powers that be, particularly those in Delhi, was nothing more than a mirage. From my interactions and discussions with people in and around the place, I had a lingering feeling that reality was at odds with canonical wisdom of the time; I harboured perennial doubts about the long-term viability of an apparent mismatch that had been fostered on the place through various machinations and historical quirks. The place, to me, seemed to be straddling deeply faulty political tectonic plates. The ensuing collision could not be avoided, nor could the impact of the impending cataclysm be predicted. And when that collision happened, it defied the worst predictions, if any. While geological collusions occur through the course guided by forces of nature, the unscrupulous external forces and powers to

be with absolute lack of imagination hastened the eruption of political fault lines in Kashmir, resulting in a war that engulfed the entire populace.

What had also completely defied any prediction was an utter fragility and total collapse of the state even when the war was in its infancy; the later regrouping of the state came in the form of a counter-insurgency strategy that outdid the rebels in tactics and torture and veritably in brutality. The overarching conflict became all-consuming and not a single demographic group could escape its trepidations and effects. The war obliterated an old order; or perhaps that old order failed to see its obsoleteness. Many from that old order either escaped or embraced a new reality, but those for whom neither option existed were left to fend for themselves.

The armed insurrection of 1989 did not happen overnight; as a matter of fact, it had been on the anvil for a long time. It was there to see for anyone who wanted to see the signs. The seeds of future conflict in Kashmir were already sown the moment an instrument of accession was signed in 1947; both the Indian leadership and representatives of Kashmir harboured visions that were at complete cross purposes. The former, more interested in an idea of a monolithic unified Indian state than anything else and the latter, holding on to the dream of an autonomous entity.

One of the fundamental facts remained that accession to the Indian state never gained acceptance and legitimacy in the Valley, which was further complicated by forced and inhumane demographic engineering in the Jammu province at the behest of the then Dogra ruler. For the Indian state it didn't take long to lay bare its naked ambitions through the dismissal of the Sheikh Abdullah government in 1953. From then onwards all it did was run a charade of stage-managed democracy in the state. Nevertheless, the decades of 1970s and 1980s, in my opinion, were a watershed in pushing the valley into the inferno of 1990s. The changed geopolitics of the subcontinent in early 1970s did not leave Kashmir unaffected and in part led to an accord of 1975 that brought Sheikh Abdullah back to power in the state, albeit in a much-diminished avatar.

The Indian government, with its known propensity to be shortsighted, evidently also failed to perceive changes taking place in the international arena, in particular the Iranian revolution that overthrew the Shah and eventually brought Shiite clergy headed by Ayatollah Khomeini into power and the global forces unleashed in its aftermath. It continued demonstrating its unreformed vehemence in 1980s in its dealings with Kashmir after the

death of Sheikh Abdullah. This not only further alienated the people but led to hardening of opinions against what was now seen as nothing more than an oppressive state. Twin disasters—the state governor in the form of Jagmohan, twice over, and botched elections of 1987—could in many ways be thought of as the catalysts for the disaster that befell the Valley in the 1990s. The increased tenuousness of the situation in the Valley was accompanied by the ever-increasing brutality by security forces of the state. The question of whether rebellion would have been otherwise circumvented is hard to answer; the disaster, nevertheless, always lurked in the shadows, owing to faulty underpinning of the entire enterprise; perhaps the abyss into which Kashmir eventually fell was avoidable or at least could have been cushioned.

The war that engulfed Kashmir has seen many narratives enumerating the causes and consequences but most of those failed utterly, due to overt tendencies towards linearization and simplifications. History, as a historian friend would always scold me, is more than a mere narration of events; events affect people and they are the ones who live through times bad and good. As a matter of fact, history parallels the lives of the people that live through it and is best understood through their ordeals and travails. The decades of war that ravaged the Valley affected the lives of those living their ordinary existence who found themselves caught in the vortex of cataclysmic conflict. The stories of those individuals constitute the history of conflict and its genesis that resulted in lost decades and cost tens of thousands of lives.

In the context of struggle, the conflict was motivated by a cause that still remains subliminal. Despite so many writings on the conflict, the stories of individuals whose lives underwent upheavals for only them to bear have remained untold; Dr Mir Khalid has tried to change that through his narratives of the people who, in one way or the other, had their lives turned upside down by the events, either before or during, directly or indirectly. Those people in turn affected conflict and its course. Jaffna Street brings forth the stories of people, mostly inhabitants of Srinagar city, who either played their part in the conflict or were simply caught in a sort of Bermuda triangle or were mesmerizingly prescient to foretell from an era gone by about the disaster that was to befall the place. Those stories not only narrate the lives lived through those unnatural times but are remarkable for the individual perseverance they depict.

Heeding to the call to arms for a cause, Zee made a peregrination across the LoC, only to realize that the agenda of the forces and powers that be in Pakistan or Kashmir did not necessarily coincide with the aspirations of those seeking freedom from Indian repression. The institutionalization that Zee discovered would not be very different from bureaucratic trappings, laden with attendant corruption, set up by those directing Republican forces in the Spanish civil war. Was that trip filled with dreadful dangers worthless? The answer from that narrative could be summed up in an emphatic no. Veer Munshi, a Kashmiri Pandit and a budding artist, found himself on the verge of destitution with help coming from people trying to advance their own agenda and careers in public life. An early realization about the dangers of victimhood not only saved him but allowed him a place as a genuine artist in his own right. There couldn't be a better tale about self-preservation as told lucidly in 'Girl: Suborned' or, for that matter, in the chapter 'Jaffna Street' where the state saw a criminal in anyone with limbs.

The conflagration that began in 1989 had its origins in the chasms that were developing early on or had always existed, known to the omniscient individuals. The tale in 'The Marxist of Safakadal' poignantly tells the story of a leftist with an extraordinary intellect whose influence no longer mattered in the place when it went overboard.

The unnatural politics and its predicament caused an early genesis of predators. While the Indian state celebrated its complete control over Kashmir, the successor Bakshi Ghulam Muhammad, whom Khalid has termed a 'Trujillo doppelganger', installed in place of Sheikh Abdullah, spread dread in the valley through thugs of his Peace brigade. Aziz's 'Plaid Suit' and 'The Butcher's Wife' allude to ordinary aspirations becoming victims of predatory forces let loose by vested interests. How one bystander's life can go through the travails that Fayaz underwent and still survive is illustrated in the chapter 'Aquarius'.

Any saga on Kashmir would remain incomplete without reference to its esoteric Sufi mysticism that transcended faiths and its role in history of those supernatural individuals dating back to times long gone. In 'Saint of Shalimar', the narrative, after providing unparalleled insight into mysterious world of quaint mystics, veers from the present to the time when it identifies the resting place of Yaqoob Sarfi who had mentored Ahmed

Sirhindi, orthodox Sufi spiritual force in the times of Mughal Emperor Akbar.

Whether the war or the insurgency in Kashmir failed or succeeded is a matter of perspective—though in terms of status quo apparently it was a failure—but even with that benefit of hindsight, it would have, nevertheless, still happened. To understand that confounder, Dr Mir Khalid has done a great service to bring lives and events in perspective from an unparalleled intellectual depth. The volume will remain a tour de force for anyone with a genuine interest in understanding Kashmir, conflict and the aftermath, its psycho-social cost through individual lives and events.

Professor Rajiv Kumar
Heidelberg, Germany

The War, 1990 Onwards

El Guerrillero

War is always attractive to young men, who know nothing about it!

PHILIP CAPUTO, *A Rumour of War* (1977)

DURING AND AROUND the winter solstice of 1989, epochal events were unfolding around the world. The global politicogeographical fault lines were morphing, acquiring an interestingly tumultuous hue. The Berlin Wall was torn down, not only symbolizing but also paving the way for German reunification. The Romanians had executed Ceauşescu and the once mighty Red army—the spearhead of the mighty Warsaw Pact—beaten hollow by the raggedy rugged Afghans, had scurried back across the Oxus River earlier that year with its image blemished by the costs exacted by the defeat. Cossetted in the warm confines of his old Srinagar home, Zee was hooked to the constant TV newsreels telecasting the mesmerizing images of the unravelling of the Iron Curtain. A surging tide of humanity had successfully swept away the artificial lines that had hemmed them inside the post-World War II European borders for far too long.

The impermanence of the existing nation-states and the fluidity of borders abruptly dawned on Zee. In his and others' reckoning, the moment to pick up arms and widen the contours of a fledgling insurgency, which would set Kashmir free from Indian rule, had arrived. His bid to arrange his arms training in the camps located in Pakistan saw him put in a word of interest to the insurgent underground.

The apprehensive forecasts of being pummelled by the dreaded chillai kalan—the annual cold winter wind that causes Valley temperatures to plummet to sub-zero levels over its forty-day span—failed to deter Zee's zeal or determination. Unlike most aspiring insurgents, Zee wasn't banking on intangibles like luck to reinforce his chance of surviving the long and

hazardous mid-winter journey across the LoC—the Line of Control. His optimism envisaged tackling it like some child's play, his smug confidence buoyed by both his athletic zeal and climber proficiency, acquired and honed during his student years.

His call came on an exceptionally frosty night in early 1990. Years later, Zee vividly recalled the minute details. The insurgent contact spotted Zee immersed in supplication at the local mosque and tapped his shoulder. Zee hurriedly finished his prayers and left the assemblage to rendezvous with the departing group.

I

Perched on the southern embankment of the Jhelum River and abutting the Safa Kadal (Seventh) bridge, the shrine of the medieval mystic-evangelist Niyamat Ullah Shah Qadiri lacks both the imposing grandeur as well as the penitents' rush of other popular shrines that dot the old quarter of Srinagar city. Its architectural layout carries the hallmark of mankind's innate Euclidean propensities, blending with the inspiration drawn from Kashmir's Buddhist past with its centuries-old pagoda spire, sliding roof and single-storey structure. For any imaginative eye, this convergence epitomizes the native Kashmiri society's subliminal urges, which over the centuries actively sought to acculturate these Iranian mystic-evangelists through the architectural appropriation of their resting places to facilitate their seamless blending into the local urban milieu.

During his lifetime, Niyamat Ullah's famed clairvoyant faculties burnished his credentials and afterwards, his predictions acquired mythic dimensions. According to the local folklore, Qadiri's corpus of prophesies —in the form of Farsi quatrains—was eventually embossed onto copper plates and interred in the mausoleum with his remains in order to prevent prying eyes gaining unwanted insight into the distant future.

One particular quatrain was destined to permanently etch itself into the annals of the Safa Kadal bridge over the span of many centuries. Pertaining specifically to the fate of the Kashmir Vale, this prophecy interestingly posited the Safa Kadal bridge itself in the middle of a promised messianic redemption marked for the Vale in the near distant future. According to legend, the saint's prescient visions foresaw a vast Muslim army commanded by a Turkic general, carrying the nom de guerre of Habibullah,

emerge from the highlands of Northern Khorasan*. This horde would supposedly sweep through the passes of the Karakorum Range and terminate the sufferings of the Vale's inhabitants at a preordained time in the future.

This presaged army would then assemble at the famed Eidgah ground—a furlong or so away from the bridge—and march across the newly rebuilt Safa Kadal bridge to conclude their conquest.

Although allusions to the specific contents of the prophecy attained a pervasive presence over time, interestingly, no written record or material substantiating the quatrain's existence ever surfaced. Even as the denizens of the Vale chafed under the brutal Sikh rule and later the Dogra monarchy's depredations, its particulars were distilled, imbibed, garnished and then passed on like a family heirloom, spurring a messianic undercurrent in the Safa Kadal locality. The extent to which the prophecy stirred the imaginations of the inhabitants can be gauged by the fact that the legend of a Turkic warrior-redeemer crossing a river of blood and fire perpetuated itself generations on.

II

Even as the Iron Curtain unravelled in Europe promising a new world order, the talk of the imminent advent of Niyamat Ullah Qadiri's presaged redeeming legions found itself revived and loquaciously re-rendered in obsessive discussions at the many shopfronts and faucets dotting Safa Kadal. 'The Kashmir Vale seemed primed or at the cusp of a violent revolutionary change,' Zee recalled the rumours of war; an impending insurrection and its inevitability abounded. Everyone, Zee included, felt stirred by indescribably exciting and heady premonitions of an imminent putsch. Many fervently aspired to train in guerrilla warfare and become part of the legions marching to victory.

In mid-December 1989, members of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, or JKLF, abducted Rubaiya Sayeed, the daughter of the newly appointed union home minister of India, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, in Srinagar in broad daylight. Her snatching not only dominated the news headlines but also rattled the Indian polity and security establishment to the core. In the eyes of many observers, the prisoner-swap, to secure her release a week later, marked the watershed moment where the Indian state's

monopoly of violence and intimidation was perceived as being challenged successfully by a militarized segment of the Kashmiri population. Given the halo that any victorious moment endows its celebrants, within days a still-nascent anti-Indian insurgency stirred the imagination of the wider population who came round to the militants' declamation to view violence as a means of political progression, helping it to acquire widespread public support never imagined before.

The slogans, the stupefied eyes of the elders and the defiant swagger of youngsters forming the jubilant crowds assembled to witness and celebrate the prisonerswap in the old city's Buhyr Kadal precinct can be seen as the war sentiment's signal event. On that cold afternoon of 14 December 1989, the militant rhapsody enjoining a call to arms roused thousands at the venue, including Zee. For the first time a unifying sentiment, traversing the class and social prejudices that had so doggedly afflicted Kashmiri society before, seemed to be in place. The till then subterranean, romanticized notion of azaadi, had that day, within the span of a few hours, come above-ground and congealed to become a rallying cry, a slogan, a declaration of war against the Indian state. Freedom from Indian rule now appeared somewhat concretized and within reach.

The keeling over of the state authority within days was seen by many as a poetic comeuppance wrought on the Indian establishment. Their arrogant self-deception, wilful ignorance had roundly failed to grasp the changes on the ground in Kashmir even as Russians were driven out of Afghanistan, having long dismissed Kashmiris as non-martial non-virile people given to easy living. The Indian state seemed ill-prepared to contend with the new mindset and warlike proclivities of the new generation. The outpaced state ideology that in the years had spawned Machiavellian ad-hoc fixes for Kashmir's turbulent polity never saw it coming until it hit them.

III

At first glance, the thick white sheets of snow and frost draping the pine-laden escarpments and heights forming the LoC—dividing the Kashmir state between India and Pakistan—made the mountain ranges appear both interminable and unconquerable. More than seventy boys exfiltrating across the LoC had perished in avalanches a few weeks prior on the same route and their fate weighed heavily on the minds of Zee's motley group.

The two-day journey involved travelling along LoC trails through the dangerously steep and avalanche-prone heights, which demanded resilience of spirit and physique even from hardened trekkers like Zee who were acclimatized to the highlands and rarefied atmospheres. Enduring the cold wind, the freezing snowy climes, the icy floes and slippery slopes on the long journey was an altogether different ball game. Even their pherans—the ubiquitous local winter-dressing overcloth—rapidly turned stiff as the dampness accrued from sweat and melting snowflakes froze. Trudging through the passes in the night under a cloud cover obviated chances of developing snow blindness, but many in the twenty-strong group developed chilblains, and the risk of frostbite was real. Years before, Zee had read accounts by the famed mountaineer Reinhold Messner—whom he fervently idolized—detailing the agonizing loss of his toes to frostbite during his solo mountain climbing forays. Luckily, he didn't go Messner's way.

Late into the third night they finally made contact with a Pakistani paramilitary border outpost. Inside, the friendly hugs of the soldiers, cups of hot tea and the cosy warmth proffered by a charcoal stove turned the scene galvanic and reassuring. Later, they were ushered into a barrack some distance away. Zee's alarm bells rang the moment stiff-gazed men in civvies individually photographed the arrivals and jotted down their personal details. Being a very street-smart lad, his mind hovered round the possibility that the details and photography essentially signalled that the Pakistanis were keeping a record of the trainee-insurgents, and that for Zee meant they were in a very strong position to make people adhere to their plans through threats of blackmail and betrayal to Indian side if they stepped out of the line.

A tarpaulin-covered khaki-coloured army truck parked outside with its engine idling would convey them to their destination: the training camps in Muzaffarabad. The discomfort of the truck's interior and the eeriness surrounding the picture-taking affair left Zee uneasy and unable to sleep.

Little did he know that this collaborative seeding between the trainees and the camps would one day lead to a hoard of bittersweet memories, like some live-in affair. Its adventurous entanglements and aftermath would leave both illustrious and mediocre camp graduates dead, exiled, disillusioned or broken. A tiny minority would in time hog the limelight though, fuelled by cable TV spectatorship, by metamorphosing into politicians.

IV

Nestled in the Himalayan ranges, Muzaffarabad was an unprepossessing overgrown mountain town that had seen overnight transformation into a base camp for the newly spawned Kashmir insurgency. This once-burgeoning trade route stop's decline had commenced the moment it ceased being a stopover for traders, students and vagrants crossing to and fro from pre-Partition Punjab. Zee found its inhabitants tawdry and its stale-smelling environs stupendously boring. The locals' overly easy value judgements and latent impressions of Valleyites—treating the trainees with an air of stereotypical familiarity—especially irked him.

The deluge of young Kashmiri lads crossing the LoC in their thousands, driven both by fervour and indiscriminate recruitment, was the Pakistani intelligence establishment's wildest dream blooming beyond expectations, but it also exposed their poor situational grasp. The Pakistani army's intelligent plodding had successfully drawn up new combat frontlines inside an adversary state. But their best planning couldn't endure the momentum and new timescales that the trainee rush had acquired. Their inchoate response included erratic and chaotic training schedules, paucity of trainers, and inadequate boot camp infrastructure. Lack of coordination made the imparting of arms training to the aspirants within realistic timelines and in a planned and coherent manner nigh impossible. The training routine increasingly resembled a carousel, where trainees waited their turn sometimes weeks and months before they got to trudge the conveyor belt leading to the training boot camps or were able to lay their hands on a Kalashnikov.

The transit safe houses and trainee holding areas assigned to the tanzeems* within the towns felt afflicted with ennui and in disarray. Lodging, food and washing facilities were woefully inadequate, leading to an appalling level of overcrowding. The urbanites were especially finicky about their preferences, while the rural lads, lacking the former's profound sense of entitlement, endeared themselves to the camp administration and intelligence officials. Their varied social backgrounds and expectations led to conflict, which the cramped spaces and paucity of basic facilities exacerbated. Fistfights broke out. For many of the trainees, the feeling of being unaccommodated if not unwanted, mouldered the sense of euphoria and dampened their spirit.

Private operators, especially opportunistic Pakistani politicians, cashed in on the disinterest and apathy bred by the non-utilization of the boys' potential and fervour, eagerly entering the fray to take over the feeding and training for their own ends.

V

Overall, Pakistani culture and the ethnic tapestry baffled many of the trainees, especially the ever-curious Zee who found the Pakistani Punjabis sharing much more than linguistic affinity to the Indian side—including phenotype similarities and Jat and Rajput clan affiliations—if not culinary preferences. The Pathans though were very different, phlegmatic, insular and aggressive to an unbelievable level. Though everyone seemed to open welcoming arms, most of the Kashmiri trainees preferred their own company whittling away their time sharing risqué anecdotes or exchanging rumours, keeping fit or loafing around. Others acquired religious veneers. Sporty sorts made a beeline for the ubiquitous pool and billiard joints, which surprisingly, unlike in Srinagar, weren't an elitist preserve in Muzaffarabad. In these pool hangouts, many Kashmiri boys became veritable stars given their short learning curves and accelerated acumen that saw them master the nuances, moves and tricks of the game within no time.

Adventure seekers toured far and wide. Almost everyone began their tourist forays with a visit to the late General Zia-ul-Haq's tomb in Islamabad's Faisal Mosque. The Kashmiri lads jumped on all sorts of transport, gallivanting through almost all the major Pakistani cities. The gaudily bedecked buses plying the roads were laughingly likened to the shrines back home, with many a jaunty character offering comically irreverent salaams even as he hopped into their vestibules. Train rides took them down south, to Karachi, where many of the boys encountered beaches for the first time in their lives.

One enterprising trainee—a tough downtown Srinagar ironmonger—seared by the harsh Afghan summer, went AWOL from his advance training stint with the Afghan mujahideen. Years on, much battered after a lengthy spell in jail, he remembered hopping a cross-border lorry rushing the famed Khyber Pass. He hitchhiked the rest of the way to the Murree hill station, treating himself to its cool environs before returning to Muzaffarabad. In his sprawling workshop, taking a break from pushing a welding torch through

an inch-thick iron plate, he pulled back his visor, and with a discernible glint in his eyes recalled flagging down the truck a couple of miles from the border crossing, the flummoxed look on the driver's face and the first query put to him: '*Pukhto poyjyey*?' (Do you speak Pashto?)

Zee and his friends arrived in Rawalpindi, the twin city of Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan, with the sole purpose of indulging themselves. They loitered around enthusiastically, and watched the Jean Claude Van Damme-starrer *Blood Sport.* A local flick starring Sultan Raahi made Zee cringe and swear off watching a Punjabi movie ever again.

Many lads had a lustful admiration for the actress Arifa Siddiqui and harboured dreams of knocking on her door or trying their luck at seeing her in the flesh. Zee resisted his own urge to meet Marina Khan, his long-time love fantasy. Her visage had taken hold of his senses with her debut appearance in a famed PTV serial, *Tanhaiyaan*, which had been a raging hit back home. For Zee, his amatory thoughts and cherished daydreams of tying the knot with her appeared to be silly fantasies in the grim war-camp milieu he was now a part of.

A chance stopover at the Rawalpindi civil hospital came as a rude reality check. Prodded by an acquaintance for the visit, Zee came across dozens of Kashmiri boys whose limbs had been claimed by frostbite in the border crossing and who had been left to fend for themselves with no one to care for them. Many of these motivated young men had amputated index fingers and with teary eyes, voiced their regret over their inability to ever fire a gun in their lifetimes.

The appalling sight led Zee to tend to their care for several days, before seething anger saw him barge into a tanzeem office in Rawalpindi. A heated argument ensued with the man in charge, Aziz Sheikh. Also present was Ashraf Dar, a high-ranking militant from the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen group, who had come visiting. Zee accused Aziz of wilful neglect and dereliction of duty towards the children of his own people, who heeding a call to war had left their hearths and placed themselves in harm's way. Aziz, himself a country boy, retorted by reproaching Zee, accusing him of carrying the proverbial chip of the city slicker on his shoulder, and declaimed that he would not let himself be badgered, no matter what. Though visibly peeved, Aziz eventually relented on Ashraf's insistence, mobilizing the necessary resources, and arranging cash and caretakers for the hospitalized men.

While Ashraf became a combat casualty soon after his return to the Vale in the 1991, Sheikh Aziz was killed years later. In 2008, Indian soldiers interdicted and fired upon demonstrators near the border town of Uri to prevent them overrunning the LoC in the wake of the Amarnath land deal agitation. Aziz, a ranking separatist politician by then and leading this ill-fated march, was one of the many casualties.

Zee nursed many of the boys back to health before heading back to Muzaffarabad. There, many of the eager trainees, unable to withstand the agony of waiting to hold an AK-47, were being fast-tracked. These individuals seemed more than content cranking two shots into the air and three into the bullseye of a target, loading their haversacks with the choicest of weapons and making their way back. Many of the boys bought weapons off the market for personal use. For Zee, these were the beginnings of the meltdown, an ab initio point for these badly trained boys to indulge in the bravado bred by a misplaced sense of power and valour that clutching a Kalashnikov inevitably embeds in unwise minds. In time, Zee's hunch was proved right even as these poorly trained men with lower levels of competence, discipline and motivation saw themselves being a liability in combat and thought it better to give in to their inclinations to become predators on their harbouring populace.

In Zee's view, only a structurally monolithic guerrilla army with a unified chain of command could effectively engage big enemy states in wars of attrition. A chance meeting with a departing friend at this juncture made Zee realize the nuances of the bigger game at play. Apart from the weapons, the camp graduates were also provided with propaganda leaflets by Pakistanis, and other paraphernalia to start an eclectic bunch of four-man tanzeems with imaginatively pugnacious nomenclatures.

Zee couldn't fathom the reason why the 'benefactor' Pakistani intelligence agencies were engendering a hopelessly divided* armed movement in the Valley. In reality, this proliferation was driven not by the outsized egos of the trainees, but rather by the divisive agenda of the Pakistani military establishment. The realization increasingly began to pester the overly pragmatic Zee. He had always prided himself on being a physical sort, tempered by a cold calculating temperament; passivity or enforced quietude in the prevailing circumstances was unacceptable. At that moment he thought whether he could make a difference, but for that a beginning had to be made. Rather than while away his time in futile

discussions, as to what should be or could have been, he knew he had to get into the fray and somehow wheedle his way into the tanzeem's office.

Zee's stern but affable demeanour and Manichean outlook made quite an impression and grabbed the attention of 'Ace', a powerful man within the tanzeem ranks. In their very first meeting, Zee came across as an educated though hard-headed individual with a sense of purpose and focus regarding the task at hand, unlike others. Impressed, Ace decided to mentor him.

VI

An austere and poised individual, Ace dressed spartanly in spotless white kurta pyjamas and constantly visited the camps, listening to problems and arranging logistics such as better food, house stays, cash and combat uniforms. The aura surrounding him not only drew people into his orbit but also, as Zee too discovered, stepped up their self-esteem. Ace's martial spirit, enviable grasp of the insurgency and motivated pursuit of efforts and requisites were the stuff of legend.

Ace, unlike Zee, had a rural upbringing. He was part of the pioneers, the pilot batch of men who had stealthily crossed the LoC to train in arms under the aegis of the Pakistani army trainers in early 1988. Their arrival was considered propitious and of such consequence by the then president of Pakistan, General Zia-ul-Haq, that he personally felicitated and welcomed them. Many of these pioneers would later cut their teeth in combat against the departing Red army in Afghanistan.

Having cultivated a serious religio-political ideological bent early on, Ace's pioneer cohorts did not need the cry of an earnest innocence mauled in the repressive aftermath of the rigged 1987 elections, wherein earnest young hopefuls who had run anti-incumbency campaign were gratuitously repressed as an alibi for a call to arms. Zee and his cohort's firm convictions and innate motivational clarity sprang from their view that the indiscriminate violence and indelible humiliation through political disenfranchisement that the Indian state inflicted on the valleyites since 1947 stemmed from the variant, irreconcilable and mutually antagonistic confessional identities vis-à-vis the 'Hindu dominated' Indian state and them muslim majority inhabitants of Kashmir, and that breaking the Indian state's monopoly of violence through the force of arms was the need of the

hour was already well-known amongst their acquaintances in the student and other fraternities much before.

In the late spring of 1988 this insurgent vanguard, having concluded their arms training, returned to the Vale and lay low, limiting their activities to recruitment. But disaster struck early on. One of their mates, victimized in the post-1987 election pogrom, and a previous worker and bodyguard for an opposition political candidate, insisted on extracting payback from his former tormentors in the state police force.

To this end, in mid-September 1988, Ace and the others, armed with Kalashnikovs, led a botched raid on a ranking police official's house in a Srinagar suburb. Details of the incident remain hazy to this day. The clash left Ace's vengeful comrade dead, and as Zee discovered, some of Ace's fingers on his left hand limp with diminished function. Injury forced Ace underground before he was sent for and given overall charge to sort out the chaos in tanzeem camps across the LoC in end-1989.*

VII

Zee saw his appointment as Ace's aide-de-camp as an anointment. His mentor's discernment of a kindred spirit in him made it imperative to imbue the former's frugal habits and disciplinarian streaks. Part of the job entailed being a minder for new recruits, a task easier said than done.

Within the camps, many resented the trust reposed in Zee and petty bickering reared its head. A fellow Srinagar lad, unable to swallow Zee's elevation, pretended possession by a demon, threatening to devour everyone if Zee remained in charge. This over-imaginative ploy ended in a vicious fistfight where knives were drawn and the camp guards had to intervene.

Zee's background in physics and stout athletic build earned him a recommendation to a specialized training camp. Before venturing out, he made a courtesy call on his mentor. It turned out to be an ordeal on an exceptionally hot summer day. A day before Zee was to leave, he was unable to get hold of Ace at the usual places. His mentor had turned into a recluse, cutting himself off from everyone. Zee, assuming his mentor preferred a warrior's contemplative solitude, instead found someone in the throes of bereavement. Ace's unusually tearful tone and morose mood betrayed his grief. His close friend—an Afghan war veteran—had been ambushed and killed by Indian army commandos in a lightning raid on a

Srinagar hideout. The sudden and stealthy attack had caught Ace's comrade ill-prepared, lightly armed with only a personal pistol and without any chance of putting up a spirited fight worthy of his experience and skill.

Ace's comrade had been snitched on, a rare occurrence in those days. The information trickling in through the insurgent communication networks was speculative rather than accurate. A few months before, the Afghan war vet had kidnapped a pro-India legislator as a pawn for a prisoner exchange, and had him killed after Governor Jagmohan's administration refused to accede to their demands. There were rumours that information provided by the followers of this deceased politician had led to the lightning raid. Ace was troubled by the prospect of his emotionally charged cadres reacting violently to these speculations, which would spell a bigger disaster if visualized in the larger context: wanton civilian killings would in Ace's view undermine the public support they so needed to sustain the insurgency. Ace nevertheless bid Zee adieu with the solemn thought, whilst tearfully allowing himself a rare display of emotion: *'We all have to die one day, but we could do our bit to make it worth it by not smudging our claim on posterity by indulging in hasty or ill-thought actions.'*

Oblivious to its destination, Zee undertook another prolonged journey in the queasy environs of a tarpaulin-draped truck. But the moment Zee emerged from the truck and lifted his gaze, the sight left him enraptured. The fresh air of the pine-covered mountains, imbued with the aroma from the trees, wafted over him. There was a small rivulet and the incessant sounds emanating from the forested hills indicated abundant wildlife.

The camp itself consisted of boarded up wooden barracks. The trainees were marched up to a clearing in parade formation where they came face-to-face with their instructors. These were around half-a-dozen armed individuals in mufti whose tough wiry physiques, forbidding stares, steady hands and hermetic living off the land led Zee to surmise years later that they had been billeted with a Special Forces team of the Pakistan army.

In the coming days, teaching commenced with hands-on exploration of varied weapons and sniping techniques in between physical training sessions. The trainers honed the trainees' field craft and weapon handling with such exactitude as to leave the lads both physically and mentally exhausted. In the open-air classroom, Zee's background in conceptual physics came in handy in easily learning the practical utilities of trajectories, mil-dots, slant angles, parabolas and other combat science

basics. The explosives class in particular commenced with the instructor declaiming a hard-to-forget maxim:

Barood ki pehli galti, zindagi ki akhri galti hoti hai.

(The first mistake you commit while handling explosives will be the last mistake of your life.)

The lessons of fighting a hit-and-run war included the basics of muzzle awareness on maneuvers, reconnaissance missions, assault and ambush tactics, and envelopment raids interposed with live firing exercises. The weapons training was imparted using Chinese versions of Warsaw Pact arms, and encompassed everything from pistols to heavy machine guns, from mortars to rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). The guns weren't new but were oiled and serviced. Even the camouflage parkas were hand-me-downs, leading him to surmise that they were dealing with either the surplus or the detritus of the Afghan war.

For jungle warfare initiation they were divided into groups with a fair sprinkling of Pakistani volunteers destined for the Afghan theatre of operations. In this phase, they were taught how to fight their way out of enemy ambushes and cordons utilizing elementary counterattack tactics of abseiling the heights, sweeping enfilades and explosives. One day, as he crawled his way through swathes of hastily laid razor wire with a heavy machine gun fusillade providing battle inoculation, a stray bullet hit a local trainee next to him. He watched the victim, his face and skull mangled beyond recognition, groaning in the agony of his death rattle. With the brain tissue and blood from the mortally wounded trainee—with whom moments before he had exchanged a smile and a handshake—splattered over him, Zee unthinkingly got up and walked out even as the man's life ebbed away.

Instructors commended Zee's aggressive single-mindedness; short learning curves in their view were the attributes of a natural soldier. He was drawn to the fighting professions and guns right from his childhood, but this training stint was an ersatz version of real soldiering. Being commended for excelling in this made him doubt whether he had really earned it or was being patronized, he couldn't really figure out at that time.

Zee's enthralment of the mesmerizing natural beauty of the camp locale and an over-curiosity regarding his surroundings eventually got him into trouble. His nonchalant inquiry of their location from the camp guards one

day made him realize the consequences of flouting the norms of camp discipline.

Their response was a deadpan look, and he thought the trouble had ended there. To his surprise, the matter resounded in the classroom. One of the dour-faced instructors broke his cold reserve and addressed the matter generically, perhaps to avoid insulting Zee's dignity directly. He concluded with a subtle warning—which still affronted Zee's self-regard—that even harmless inquisitiveness could arouse suspicions about the inquirer's antecedents and earn him the risk of permanent disappearance. Zee understood the message.

His first interaction with this particular reprimanding trainer was on the night of his arrival at the camp. That night, a snake slithered into the trainee barracks, forcing Zee to enter the trainer's tent to fetch a weapon and thus wake him up. Years later he still remembered the zombie-mask face; the trainer had the pitiless countenance of an assassin. The realization that people who kill without compunction and regret did exist made him shudder at that moment. And it was well known that he feared nothing.

After the subtle reprimand, a sense of menace pestered Zee through the day. But then he comforted himself, knowing that if push came to shove, he would kill first before he died or was made to disappear. The incident had been a reality check on the layout and the fluidity of his terra firma and his savvy side preferred to take its lessons lockstep with his much evolved sangfroid.

At the culmination of training, a higher-up arrived. A slightly older man with a military bearing, he delivered his motivational graduation pep talk in a baroque tone. For Zee, the speech instilled a realization that the Kashmiri war against the Indian state was theirs alone. And contrary to what they had been told, they should be ready for a long fight. The armed nucleus comprising the trainees would be put into action behind enemy lines, but not in a hammer and anvil strategy. That the Pakistani assistance and aid with regard to weapons and sanctuaries was guaranteed given. But here again the Afghan theatre of operations and the fighters were held up as an example to emulate, which in time Zee would discover was crass patronization given the fact that the Russo-Afghan war was a much bigger undertaking, the Pak-Afghan border was an open one, unlike the LoC, and the Indian army's numbers on the ground in the Vale were many times higher than what Russians had in Afghanistan. To any undiscerning mind

with no concept of irony, to be compared to people with proven warrior spirit, fighting with half the world backing them, was a very flattering prospect indeed. Zee realized then that the insurgency in the Valley was an open-ended operation for the Pakistani establishment, and consequently no direct action with the definitive purpose of fighting a war for Kashmir's liberation ala India intervention in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in tandem with Mukti Bahini fighters as promised by General Zia-ul-Haq to the pioneer Kashmiri militants would ever be initiated or executed.

His training complete, Zee was dispatched to the Afghan-Pakistani border, part of a bronegruppe* reinforcing the many active fronts. In those hot summer days and nights, he patrolled the crags and defiles of the mountainous Afghan countryside, hopping Datsun pickups and warily negotiating minefields on foot. He helped lay ambushes and repel raids of the Afghan National Army, many a times manning anti-aircraft machine gun nests to engage helicopter gunships and fighter jets pounding their positions. The sepulchral silences of abandoned, burnt-out villages and ruined orchards left a lasting impression on Zee. The moonscape surroundings seemed so unreal, so bare and desolate as to be unfit to support even a troglodyte existence. He surmised that these haunting environs were probably less disturbing to individuals like him who didn't possess a sense of belonging to this forbidding terrain. But what of the souls who had once inhabited these villages, or possessed an imbued notion of a home here? Was he biased to perceive everything through the prism of an alien city slicker, indulging in gratuitous value judgments? Perhaps he was, he thought.

Unlike the Kashmiris, Pashtun society was a predominantly tribal one, based on strong notions of honour and vengeance. The pervasiveness of their vengeful warrior spirit infused them with a sense of fierce superiority that left Zee in awe. The Pashtuns he came across seemed congenitally averse to being deferential or taking orders from anyone, least of all the Pakistanis. How such a martial race with a grandiose vision of their history and awash in weapons could have been routed by Najibullah's army in the Jalalabad battle the previous March was beyond his grasp. Their backers, the Pakistani establishment, pursuing their strategic depth policy with single-minded ruthlessness in the offing was now pushing for another offensive in Khost.

For Zee, a novitiate on what he ironically termed a student exchange programme, the fighting on the Afghan front smacked of ad-hocism borne of aimlessness. The Afghan resistance's belief in fighting for an illusory purpose appeared futile except perhaps when seen through the deterministic prism of an ingrained indifference towards death borne of tribal mindsets or an overly religious martyr's motivation. He got a measure of their fatalistic premised thought process whilst accompanying an injured comrade to the Kuwaiti-run hospital in Peshawar, when he saw Pashtun fighters readily consent to amputations without forcing the surgeons to explore limb salvage options.

The depressing similarity between the conflicts and the violent destabilization transforming the social and psychological mores back home haunted him. Was this the distant future of his own home? Thoughts of the necessary price people have to pay to attain political goals in violent milieus comforted him.

Years later, Zee's insight into the Afghan mindset and notions of family honour led him to dissuade a passing acquaintance—a Kashmiri lad who had eloped with a Panjshiri girl living in Delhi and subsequently mistreated her—from visiting Kabul after the fall of Najibullah. Fed up with the physical abuse at his hands, the girl had fled back to her family and relocated to Kabul after the Tajik forces of Ahmed Shah Massoud took over following the fall of Najibullah. Her father insisted that the son-in-law undertake the trip to Kabul with him to sort out the matter*. The wife-abuser's fate would have been sealed as soon as he stepped off the plane. Elopement and physical abuse was an affront enough to get him flayed alive by his in-laws.

VIII

After his training stint in Afghanistan, Zee returned to Muzaffarabad after spending a few days in the hill resort of Kagaan. There had been a sea change in the camp environment. The camp administration had been placed under the supervision of a vexatious upper ground party apparatchik bereft of both combat ambitions and background. This middle-aged commissar had assumed the trappings usually reserved for the Kashmiri political elite, as evidenced by his foppish habit of dressing in tweed achkans and karakul felt headgear. He gave the impression of being obsessively engrossed in

cultivating the image of a leader. Surrounded by flunkies, he comported himself like a self-important bureaucrat with flamboyant displays of authority, which in his warped sense, partly emanated from the gleaming Mitsubishi Pajero SUV allotted to his office by the Pakistanis. His petty grouses and grudges led him to coddle his favourites and treat others like unwanted straphangers, making the camp atmosphere hostile and quarrelsome.

The commissar extended an indifferent hand to Zee on their very first meet. Evidently lacking the requisite military acumen and spirit, in Zee's eyes the commissar appeared more of a demagogue, adept at delivering optimistic victory speeches in Urdu, whose rhetorical flourish he had liberally borrowed from Naseem Hijazi's novels. Even his normal conversations were replete with dewy-eyed romanticizing of the fighters, the heavenly attributes of martyrs and talk of the abject defeat in store for the Indian enemy. While others might have found this lofty rhetoric inspiring, Zee thought differently. The Afghan experience had changed him; he had developed an eagle's eye, an overview of things that led him to dismiss the commissar as a quixotic individual.

Unable to figure out as to why such a person was in charge, Zee sought out Ace in order to ask him to spell out the compulsions that had forced him to relegate his authority. The latter's calm aura meant that he was unwilling to expand on the subject. Ace's non-controversial answers did little to soothen Zee's embittered fellow feeling. Ace's ennobling akrasia—rationalized by a sermon on the necessity of being ambitionless, given the long hard struggle on their hands, wounding it up by a platitudinous declaration of being dignified, serving as a foot soldier, believing in his cause—roundly failed to convince Zee.

Ace's pioneer status, battlefield experience, irrefutable honesty and inspiring warrior's creed had endowed him with a diadem of authority. Human frailties had gotten the better of the fresh-off-the-boat ideologues who in Zee's retort, were more adept at chasing the privileges and status denied to them back home. These blarney spewing, bolshevist-minded men with their sense of privileged entitlement felt disconcerted by Ace's well-deserved stature and popularity, and hence had conspired to get Ace out of the driving seat—something needed to be done, Zee insisted.

But Ace cut him short with an impersonal reflection on the dangers of confronting the misplays of these inept gasbags given their powerful

backers—Pakistan's politicos embedded within the Pakistani military establishment.

Zee's mates discerned his visceral hatred for the commissar and groused in assent, albeit in hushed tones. Many also resented his opposing stand. Ace's demurral meant that while the commissar's ham-handedness, his rank opportunism was unforgivable, it was foolhardy to engage the impasse. They would end up either splitting or creating a radical faction within the organization, they informed Zee. These people saw the whole affair in terms of now, unmindful of the future. These developments served as an anticlimax that congealed Zee's pessimism and made him surmise that the insurgency project was being wilfully foredoomed. Zee still fervently believed in the cause, but he felt alienated from the people in the saddle who he came to believe were laying the seeds of failure of the insurgency project.

To Zee's gleeful surprise, the brewing resentment attained a boiling point and blew over through something else in the coming days, exacting a payback.

IX

In the summer of 1990, with the Indian army's stepping up of vigilance on their side, infiltrating militant groups sustained heavy casualties on the LoC. In the Vale itself, these border interdictions severely hampered the insurgents' abilities to replenish their ranks through fresh infusions of weapons and trained cadre. As a consequence, the tempo of militant attacks on the Indian forces began to ebb.

For operational considerations, perhaps in order to de-bulk the camps before the winters set in or out of sheer fatigue, the Pakistani army had slashed the waiting times between completion of training and infiltrating back to the Vale by launching large batches of trained insurgents back across the LoC in a deliberately concerted manner. Within the camps across the LoC there was much chagrin, as the trainees bitterly complained about the Pakistani army's lack of border strategy to the boot camp. Conversations stoked anger over why safe passages for infiltrating militants couldn't be secured by Pakistani army's heavy guns effectively targeting or engaging the Indian troops on the LoC. The loss of camp mates, friends and

acquaintances on the border was the final blow, and the consequent disquiet finally ignited a tinder pile.

One fine morning the blowback came calling; the enraged trainees ran amok in Muzaffarabad. The conflagration engulfed the whole city with hordes of angry insurgents blockading the main highway bridge, roughing up the inhabitants and bystanders, and hurling rocks at the locals' houses, law enforcement men and vehicles.

Ensconced in his party office, the dandy commissar committed the mistake of getting ahead of himself. Evidently late to be street smart, the commissar was either too smug or dumb enough to trust his non-existent moral authority, persuasive skills and pacifying powers—to paraphrase Zee's words, considering them to be par with a beatified saint—too much. The commissar had to beat a hasty retreat and flee barefoot even as Zee's unrestrained ire saw him hurl the first rock to strike his beloved SUV, smashing its windshield into smithereens. Then he calmly joined the others to immolate the much-resented SUV. The following day samizdat posters titled *Pajero kyun jali* (Why was the Pajero burned) sprang up everywhere, from boundary fences to electricity poles.

Within the Pakistani military establishment alarm bells rang, forcing them to intervene and control the situation. Despite assurances to the contrary the inaction and lackadaisical attitude of the Pakistani army on the LoC was never questioned. To Zee's dismay, the obedient silence maintained by the deferential camp commissars in front of the Pakistani army officers and intelligence operatives was telling. None amongst them wanted to evince views critical of their hosts. The reasons were obvious; the khaki-clad brass-buttoned officers were rugged individuals, whose serious straight-arrow demeanours and analytical sweep made them look every bit the larger-than-life figures seeking to alter their region's geographical chessboard. Their decisive gestures and straight talking was the antithesis of the patronizing, glib bureaucrats, the petty-minded civil servant bourgeoisie or the lightweight mewling politicians that the older camp commissars had come across on the Indian side.

Zee stumbled upon the disconcerting truth behind the Pakistani army's hands-off approach on the border in a casual conversation with an insider attending the meeting with the Army Intelligence brass. It was the then prime minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, who was responsible. Even as she gave carte blanche to the powerful army generals to run their cynical

Afghan policy, her paranoia led her to relentlessly pester, cajole and implore the army's top brass to stand down and not indulge in any border actions that would ratchet up tensions with India. Backing an insurgency was one thing but war in her view would mean the end of her premiership and a cabal of her high on adrenaline generals taking over.

This revelation profoundly dispirited Zee. Many of his astonished comrades disagreed, giving Bhutto the benefit of the doubt. The proof to the contrary soon presented itself. In September 1990, within days of Bhutto's ouster, Pakistani artillery went all out, shelling the LoC and causing casualties on the Indian side. The infiltrating insurgent groups made a dash across and arrived safely on the other side.

The heating up of the LoC by the Pakistani army provided credence to the allegations that Benazir was the quintessential windbag and a poltroon who didn't give a damn about Kashmiri lives. And when it came to practicalities, she didn't have their best interests at heart. For Zee, Bhutto's flag-wrapped rhetoric, orotund proclamations of support for the Kashmiri cause, and bombastic 'thousand-year war' speeches were crafty attempts to obfuscate the obvious. Interestingly, in the run-up to the general elections in Pakistan that saw Nawaz Sharif elected to power as prime minister for the first time in 1990, many of the trainees beholden to the bleeding heart altruistic politicians—who had hosted them in the past—found themselves following at their heels, volunteering as sloganeers and election workers.

X

Zee's frustration led him to attempt crossing back through north Kashmir's Leepa Valley with friends from another tanzeem. Exhausted after a climb, they were snoozing in a meadow when they heard laughter directed at them from a nearby ridge. From the heights fifty-odd metres away, Indian army platoons had spotted them and were poking fun at their sitting-duck situation. Though startled, Zee's training and fighting instincts came to the fore. A split second's indecision could have cost them their lives. Aiming his Kalashnikov, Zee fired without let up to provide covering fire while the others slid down the heights. The others too opened up, creating a heavy enfilade, forcing the attacking soldiers to duck. Before they could enter the safety of the pine forest, they bumped into another Indian army patrol. In the close quarter firefight the leading officer put Zee in his gunsight and

pulled the trigger, but as fate would have it the gun jammed. The group managed to extricate themselves in the heavy crossfire.

'That was my first combat foray against the Indian army. I felt blood gush in my veins and a sense of satisfaction at having called the arrogant bluff of their soldiers,' Zee recalled.

'The only injury sustained in the fracas was a lad bumping into a pine tree while fleeing; he was so traumatized by the episode that he chose not to cross back. I later heard that he had settled down in Pakistan and raised a family,' Zee added.

Having failed to cross back, he contacted Ace the moment he arrived back in Muzzafrabad. Miffed that he had attempted to cross over without his knowledge, Ace ordered Zee to cool his heels while the logistics for his return through his own group were arranged. Zee bided his time, preparing himself mentally for the long trek home, which would surely be beset with the threat of Indian army ambushes and mountainside obstacles, and going over the tactics of outsmarting or skirting the perils. The opportunity to depart presented itself in the autumn of 1990. Taking leave of his mentor, he and the other boys were driven to a launch pad somewhere in Pakistan's northern areas. He was sure of his location this time because the Nanga Parbat mountain—that he had long stared at in his school treks—had a looming presence in this area.

Pakistani intelligence men provided them with gleaming new weapons and ammunition backpacks before gathering them together for last minute dos and don'ts. He was mindful of the import of this pre-launch briefing, which disheartened him even further. He gathered it fully that once they commenced operating on the Indian side, their targets, actions, attacking trends and even the type of weapons to be utilized would be decided by the 'agency' men sitting hundreds of miles away in Rawalpindi. They had been afforded no operational autonomy and any attempt to attain it on the battlefield would be thwarted He knew it fully that the assertive lot, like his mentor would have been, are prone to indulge their minds and capabilities to attain their own tempo, choose their targets and tailor tactics and weapons as the situation demanded. Zee, with his razor-sharp mind, knew that any attempts of that sort would be thwarted. In a moment he grasped the connect with the demotion of his mentor; the commissar sorts, bereft of these battlefield proclivities and besotted to privileges, were vulnerable to arm-twisting, were more malleable than the martial- minded Ace sorts.

There were mortal dangers involved in opposing the way Pakistanis deployed their Kashmir strategy. Open dissension meant vulnerability on both sides of the LoC. It was only years later, though, that he fully appreciated the inherent dangers of confronting ‘deep states’ or getting into the wrong end of their maws or dissenting with their Byzantine forays. While the actions of the Indian side were fairly well-documented because of the insurgency, standing up to the other side carried its own hazards, as seen in the case of one well-connected insurgent who suddenly collapsed and died at a check-in counter at Kathmandu airport, only hours after he had displayed the temerity to violently disagree with his Pakistani contact. There were speculations that Pakistani intelligence tipped off the Indians about the whereabouts of others with similar proclivities. Though there were no smoking guns, it was understood that these were warnings to keep people in line.

XI

The trekkers felt addled and queasy walking for days and nights, negotiating vertiginous terrain and fording dreary valleys littered with weapons and ordnance discarded by weary infiltrating groups. The heavy weapon-load and combat paraphernalia slowed down their pace. Later, fatigue, muscle cramps and vomiting overtook their senses to break the momentum of the group, further reducing their progress.

In the mountainous wilderness, survival necessitates were trusting one’s hunches and animal instincts, and treating food and water like a precious commodity. Zee knew this and managed very well. Even with his blistered feet, others barely managed to keep up with him. Many, overwhelmed with guilt, implored the others to abandon them. Zee would have none of it; neither did the theatrics of the shivering, sick-from-the-cold comrades begging to be shot so that the rest of the group could resume their journey unhindered interest him. He hauled stragglers up the slopes as he didn’t want his conscience or sense of responsibility to admonish him.

On the fifth night, they crossed to the Indian side of the LoC, some thirty-odd miles away from home. It was drizzling. Highland villages dotted the mountainous ridges and the sempiternal rock faces of the mountain ranges stretched into infinity. In an abandoned shepherd dhoke, exhaustion set them adrift in an etherized state. Zee sat on a boulder guarding his

mates, tired but unable to sleep. He clearly remembered watching as the cold, rain-drenched darkness made way for morning, a Russian-made SVD sniper rifle resting in the crook of his right elbow. His gaze fixed itself on the granite reaches of denuded mountains that fell away to form a flattened valley floor, the cherty banks of a meandering river visible below. Standing on the mountain ridge, he heard the sound of water dripping from the branches of the pine trees as he lit a small fire to warm his hands and innards. The Kangan–Sonamarg highway was in his binocular's sights, and based on the topographical knowledge accrued in previous trekking forays here, he determined it to be the safest route to get home unscathed. He felt himself teetering on the edge of despondency, torn between his firm belief in the cause, the trust posed by his mentor and his own assessment of the situation which precluded the next step, to join insurgent ranks with very serious doubts raking his mind. He stolidly contemplated the hazards involved in traversing the next stretch, the final steps to home, which lay beyond and within a war-riven landscape ravaged further by the autumnal greys.

The time arrived, a couple of hours later. Zee dismissed the protestations of their cautious guide with an impersonal rebuff. The guide sensed an air of menace and acquiesced, little knowing that the untrusting and now somewhat paranoid Zee intended to kill him first in case Indian soldiers interdicted their passage. On Zee's instructions, the whole group donned their hooded camouflage parkas, chambered the ammunition clips into their Kalashnikovs and snicked the safety latches down to the full-burst mode. In the cold lilting rain, they marched along the highway in reckless abandon, unmindful of the dangers, as well as of the puddles of water, on the weather-rutted asphalt road.

This was a calculated risk, driven by getting over with a frustrating trek and the desperation of reuniting with their loved ones sooner had seemingly watered down their sense of trepidation. They reached their safe houses in downtown Srinagar the very same day.

They were among the lucky ones. A week later another infiltrating group followed the same route. Their bone-weary exhaustion led them to commandeer a passenger bus to cover the last stretch; they were intercepted by the Indian paramilitaries at a roadblock. In the ensuing shoot-out, many insurgents and a couple of soldiers died; the surviving militants, unable to extricate themselves, perished in the inferno that engulfed the bus.

XII

Bedraggled and fatigued, Zee rid himself of his dosser looks, showered and changed into a fresh kurta-pyjama. Having mentally opted out of the whole thing, he handed over his combat accoutrements—rifle, personal Russian-made pistol gifted by Ace, parkas, combat shoes—to the tanzeem contact. Seeking a recusal on personal and family grounds, he trudged home.

In the evening chill, the remnants of a harried humanity—hemmed in between the innumerable paramilitary sandbag bunkers dotting the roads—hurried to reach the safe confines of their homes on the muddy streets of his locality. The few people on the streets seemed too engrossed in themselves to spare him a glance. Zee found his mother waiting at the door along with his siblings, having been informed of his return. He held her face in his hands; she broke into sobs, her voice quavered, unable to form a full sentence even as she kissed his forehead. Holding on to his arm, she walked him through the courtyard of their modest home and into his room. His father appeared both stoic and miffed, refusing to speak to him. In his room, his mother finally regained her composure, enough to speak of her fears spawned on by harrowing thoughts and tormenting nightmares of losing him on some forgotten mountain peak. ‘Nine months, the first time, you came forth into my world and now, you’ve been returned back to me, reborn again!’ she remarked in a tearful tone.

Zee’s absence and walk into harm’s way had taken a heavy toll on his mother’s fortitude and it gladdened him that her optimism hadn’t encountered failure. In time, thousands of mothers witnessed their worst nightmares reify as their children died; many had put themselves on the frontline, while others were unwitting casualties, ordinary bystanders caught up in the throes of a war that Zee eschewed consciously. If Zee had thought that coming home would lift his spirits, he was mistaken. In those early days of his return, Zee was cagey and aloof, trying to make sense of his life and times. The sanguinary environs, the sight of his parents, especially of his mother, seized with panic every time a cordon and search operation caged the locality when a sniper ambush or IED (improvised explosive device) explosion claimed lives, tormented him. Dreading his past might come back to haunt them, Zee’s family forced a peripatetic existence on him. His peregrinations around India and abroad, selling artisanal wares, did little to lift his spirits, though. His reserved demeanour

became a discomfiting presence for friends, family and most worryingly, for customers. He toiled hard at one time or too lazily the other time, he incurred financial losses at the hands of cheats masquerading as business associates and customers. Dishonest dealings—increasingly buoyed by the anarchy around—were trending, aided by the undermining of redress avenues such as the locality elders and the judiciary. The corrupting effects and changed contours of the conflict were instilling a paralysis in the social ethos, corroding its traditions, beliefs and mores from within.

In the spring of 1993, Zee learnt of his former mentor's death in a clash with the Indian army through a BBC Urdu radio broadcast. Cornered a few miles away from his native village, Ace, true to his nature, preferred fighting to the end rather than surrendering. On that evening, a heavy-hearted Zee felt he had lost a personal connect, perhaps to some other time and life. He wanted to rush to Ace's home village to attend at least his wake or requiem, but his parents threw a hysterical fit. He offered an absent fatiha or requiem for his departed friend, who had joined the ranks of the many other tragic figures the war had spawned and history passed over. It was a gesture of deep-set reverence for Ace that he knew would remain within him for the rest of his life. The insurgency, as he knew it, was petering out into a dissolution epic.

XIII

Many years later, as he ventured through the main Safa Kadal thoroughfare neighbourhood, Zee came across olive-green Indian army trucks lining the road. The trucks were ferrying the corpses of militants slain in a firefight a few miles down the road to the local police station. Like many curious onlookers, he ventured up close to sneak a peek inside, counting four bloodied corpses spreadeagled on the blood-stained floor surrounded by haggard-looking soldiers in camouflage fatigues. The whispers divulged that the fallen fighters were foreign, with one local chap. The crowd, holding a wake for the dead militants, waited for the handover of the bodies for their final rites.

Within earshot of the corpse-laden trucks he came across a trim-bearded dandy dressed up in a locally tailored dark blue Burberry rip-off jacket. This former neighbour, now a ranking militant, appeared calm and unconcerned, and was whiling away his time socializing and exchanging

barbs with all and sundry. But Zee knew for a fact that this man-peddling trademark self-indulgent and inane conversations, was a notorious extortionist running one of the most efficient shakedown rackets spanning a big swathe of the old city.

This mobster-militant species, like weeds that flourish at others' expense, was an unwitting proliferative harvest of the war. This particular specimen had been a ne'er-do-well, a school dropout, who worked a lowly government job before joining the insurgent ranks. He soon realized his vocation lay in criminalizing the underground scene where his enterprising venality transformed him into one of the most affluent individuals in the city. Utilizing an over-pitched patronizing tone, he engaged Zee in a brief tête-à-tête, exuding an exaggerated sense of self. Zee construed his cackling as an attempt to get over the deprivation and inferiority complexes of yore. Much to his chagrin, the tone and content of the conversation and the interspersed badinage seemed out of sync, given the brutally poignant situation unfolding near them.

Zee left, walking through the drab and depressing winter-swept streets. If the conflict had served, or benefited anyone, it was leeches like these. This Mafioso clique accrued money, phony respectability and stature by instilling a sinister fear—of kidnapping and killing—to intimidate their unwitting civilian victims and purposefully destroying the bourgeoisie core of the society. What disgusted him even more was the sense of entitlement this morally moldered class of moochers carried, while waging a war against their own community and demanding respect and stature at par with the motivated fighters like his deceased mentor and the dead militants brought to the police station who were suffering and dying for the community.

The conflict had engendered a class of opportunists—strategic strivers with mutating personas—thriving on slush fund capitalism and extortion entrepreneurship. They comprised the nouveau riche class that was slowly making its presence felt. In time, they would emerge as the new entrepreneurs and business community even as the older moneyed class disappeared, no match for the former's overweening ambition, misbegotten influence and wealth.

As for Zee, many of his pet business ventures failed and the many fortuitous predictions of the many local soothsayers that his parents appealed to never matured.

His decision to not join the war had perhaps obviated the prospect of facing the existential dilemma of being a Mafioso masquerading as a hero. He doubted it. A dead conscience wasn't his forte. And he wasn't alone. Many like him were rebuilding their lives honestly. In one surprising instance, a tough guy he knew in the training camps was eking out his existence as a dock worker at an Indian harbour. Recently, a Safa Kadal lad had been deported from Turkey. Like Zee, he had crossed the LoC two decades ago and instead of returning, risked the chance of a new life by immigrating illegally to Turkey, where he had been working for many years.

'Imagine, a lad from here ending up in Turkey, suffering deportation and illegal immigration charges! Those long walks across the mountains altered us, altered the societal mores, altered our psyches!'

It's surprising that Zee still retains an aura of serenity, associated with people who are content with what they have. He couldn't help but declaim, 'Some people say I always dreamt of goals much higher than myself. Perhaps, I could've fared better but my emotional and psychological burdens were too oppressively overbearing.'

The altered times saw him endure his own and others cynicism borne of perpetual suffering and humiliation. From an all-round winner he had morphed into a lagger!

Epilogue

The expansive Safa Kadal bridge has long been rebuilt after the devastating fire that consumed it in 1990. The boathouses dotting the banks have vanished, their inhabitants resettled in the distant colonies of a haphazardly expanding city. For me, wandering around my hometown, Srinagar, had never been more educative. Though the city hardly resembled anything I remembered from my childhood days. The Vale's cities and towns have acquired an aura of dusty claustrophobic ugliness with roads choked by cars. Nobody risks running water slaloms on green lakes, which have morphed into shrunken cesspools. The old city or downtown, never a ritzy area, now appears ruined and floundering, but still hews obstinately to the feeling of 'having been wronged' protest politics of yore. In the old days, many of its denizens were poor, but there was a dignity about it and it never appeared a social handicap like it does now.

‘The kite-flying competitions across the riverbanks have ceased,’ Zee remarked, leaning against the bridge’s balustrade. His engaging, youngish visage, rounded with a comfortable smile, and well-groomed salt-and-pepper hair attenuated the effect of his daunting martial bearing: The lack of affectation in his demeanour pervading seamlessly into the air of his noblesse oblige had retained itself over time. The powerful tenor in Zee’s voice betrayed no trace of surliness, but its cadences hinted at the triumphs and travails he had seen himself through.

Zee’s reminiscences of his childhood capers rushing into his mind’s eye are comparable with mine. Then, Zee, along with his friends, would often be found jumping into the river from the massive wooden girders of the Safa Kadal Bridge, while I had to content myself with watching, having been effectively barred from jumping by my family. Like other downtown adolescents, Zee loved swimming, but now he wondered why they always chose this particular bank, next to the Prophesier’s shrine. As far as he could remember, the spot was treacherous, swallowing up swimmers in its undependable vortex of waves that made its appearance regularly, consuming many lives every summer.

What of the sentiment and its politics that saw him put his own life on the line, I asked. In the absence of astute political minds at the helm, the sentiment was in time carried forward by the emotionalism of the masses rather than a reasoned thought process. The political sentiment now swam in the ebb and flow of the emotional dynamic of the populace rather than being guided by a deft political class, defining and polishing it to maximize political gain within a sea of incredibly maleficent murk of the environs.

Zee digressed and avoided an answer. ‘So did your crush on Mona Malik lead you anywhere near her?’ Zee asked of my adolescent crush—a compere on a Pakistan Television version of Sesame Street, dating back to 1989.

‘No; I did meet someone very lovely who more than fitted the picture that Mona Malik had conjured up in my adolescent mind, but I lost her to fate.’

‘Fate, destiny,’ Zee muttered, smacking his lips regretfully. Turning his gaze, he pointed out the Oracle’s shrine to his two barely-into-teens kids. He then reminded me of the older generation’s fixation for a medieval seer’s prophecy. The kids weren’t ready yet, but he knew, in time, the quatrains would find their way into future conversations. But that was far

below in priority to the adventurous anecdotes borne with the new him, of the times he travelled to and back from the training camps across the LoC. Perhaps these newer stories, dappled with the descriptions of mountain peaks and denuded forests bereft of an edifice of topographic nomenclatures, were waiting to be shared and passed on to the next generation. One day he would recount his own description of the banks of the Saiful Mulook, the legendary lake that he had been to in another lifetime, twenty-odd years before and perhaps would never see again, given those contested borders that he had so joyously and enthusiastically crossed on the way to the longest trek of his life. 'Perhaps,' Zee remarked with a genial smile, 'I might even tell them that their not-so-very-great dad walked the routes marked by this Prophesier for a future Khorasani redeemer. A warrior manqué, whose footprints preceded the awaited one's on a messianic trail!' Zee's cynical laugh was interrupted and then drowned out by the noise of the overcrowded buses wheezing across the bridge. I realized Zee had actually traversed the route and ended by walking home through Eidgah.

With the afternoon sun bearing down on the bridge and us, we parted with a hug. He walked his two kids to his car and left. I paused to glean a look at the gleaming green waters of the Jhelum, pondering if the river wasn't an emotional repository for the many of us who grew up watching its eternal flow. I put in my iPod earpiece to drown out the unbearably grating traffic noise, ambled across to the left sidewalk of the bridge. I sauntered across the bridge towards home, with James Horner's 'There Is No Goodbye' buzzing in my ears.

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*Historical region encompassing parts of Central Asia and Afghanistan; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_Khorasan.

*Tanzeem: Urdu for organization—specifically insurgent grouping.

*By then, 153 insurgent militias had come into existence and were operating in the Vale.

*The 1987 Kashmir elections saw the Kashmir's GeNext political aspirations being repressed through a rigged election. Even as the NC (Jammu and Kashmir National Conference)-Congress ruling dispensation violently curbed this cohort, the aftermath saw them becoming the first entrants to arms training camps across the LoC.

*Bronegruppe: Combat concept involving the firepower of the mechanized carriers–in this case using pickups—to ferry infantry troop reserve close to a battle to influence its outcome.

*During and after the war, Panjshiris—who had long been considered lowly yokels by the Pashtuns and had chafed under their boots—had turned assertive enough to prove they were no less hard-headed than the latter.

Exiled Summers

I said that I would return when the swords have flowered.

SALVADOR DALI, *quoting a Catalan poet (1980)*

‘I CAN’T EVER figure out what my shoes look like, I have been walking always, walking on to nowhere,’ the bespectacled and wiry Veer Munshi declaims in a demonstration of flashy wit laced with metaphor. At the Khoj Art Gallery exhibition, I’m face-to-face with his latest work: a picture of downtown Srinagar taken from the shrine of the mystic Makhdoom Sheikh Hamza on Mount Koh-i-Maraan. A red wooden structure bisects the panoramic picture of the old city, its sea of rested tin roofs rendered into a flat montage, stretching far, the pagoda spires of Jamia Masjid in their midst. ‘The wooden structure in the shape of a lightning flash symbolizes the tragedy spawned by the conflict. How I took the picture is interesting, an adventurous tale worth a retell!’ He switches to his vernacular Koshur, with a mischievous glint in his eyes even as I discern the strong city-side inflection in its cadence, reminding me of my own maternal-side roots. ‘I had to get into the shrine to get the required view, so I pretended to be a Muslim, rapidly imbibing the adab due in any Muslim shrine by miming the other pilgrims, who like me had undertaken the exhausting, hundred-odd step climb to get there.’

After Veer had finished taking the photograph, he felt guilt-ridden over his resort to chicanery. A Muslim friend consoled him and told him not to worry, as the Saint, with his reputed magnanimity, wouldn’t mind a one-off innocent trespass by one of his own tribe. The ‘own tribe’ remark stumped Veer until his friend explained, ‘The Saint is a descendant of the Raina clan of Kashmiri Pandits, borne of its first generation converts!’

‘Well, then we do have an atavistic connect!’ Veer had replied.

The shoes metaphor, though, came in handy in early 1995 when Veer was invited abroad for the first time to showcase his work. Given his impoverished state, he was unable to afford a new pair of shoes for the all-expenses-paid trip to the United Nations in Geneva. He travelled to Switzerland and back with the same pair of torn loafers. ‘They were a bit noisy, but I could make do with that,’ he remembers.

‘Conflict seems to be the leitmotif of your work,’ I mouth aloud a thought as a passing inquiry. ‘Conflict, exile, diaspora, Partition,’ Veer responds in a declamatory tone. ‘Exile in particular has been an abiding inspiration. Even after I revisited my home and realized that it no longer was My Home. But let me hasten to add, that in the displacement, and within that this embodiment of thoughts, of rootlessness and being in exile, the belonging persists. This sense of loss accentuates my longing for home, day in and day out.’

Home, for Veer, is Srinagar, a place that for someone born there, transforms itself into the perpetually memorialized imagery of a sleepy city ringed by lakes and gazed upon by the jagged, high, blue-hued mountains that form its breathtakingly beautiful backdrop. He also remembers a city straddling an equipoise between the old Saracenic monasteries and shrines in the old city, and the gothic buildings and grass avenue boulevards in its upper cityside. These images erase the mournfully ugly, traffic-choked and unplanned city it has become. A biased perception we seem to nurse unsparingly, I suppose, for a place where we were both born and brought up; he, in Barbar Shah, half a mile away from my maternal-side home in Mandar Bagh.

The crocheted lanes and waterways that Veer names and talks of are familiar and shared. This is where I myself fell in love for the first time with a high school basketball star and crooned Bono’s ‘We need new dreams tonight’ line while watching the whirls of a lake’s green waters. A place where I acquired my spoken slang and its city-side intonations, its gamut of courtesies, colourful barbs and spine-chilling invectives, and where, amidst the waves of a brutal war, I found myself levitating in horror. This collective memorialization and experience connects us, I suppose.

I

In the spacious studio and house in Gurgaon that Veer shares with Neerja—his wife of ten years—his artistic touch seeps through the architecture of the dwelling. He designed it himself, he says. The gain of a permanent address in an affluent neighbourhood hasn't dented his self-image over the years, though, he adds. Even after years, there is a constantly gnawing feeling of pervasive impermanence within, borne of what he calls an embedded refugee temperament.

The studio itself is immaculately clean, with its walls and the black marble floors bedecked with canvasses dappled with imaginative artistic imagery. The paint and the sweeps seem to transmogrify, celebrating an expression of the self in some far-off liminal domains, indefinable in our vocabulary with its inadequacies. A rich and varied inundation of ideas has been put under the brush here—daubs of a pointillist, cubist art and impressionist paintings. In a corner, in multiple rows, rests his corpus of conceptual art. Among other things is a massive model of a human skull with a papier mâché veneer. It makes up a part of his new project, Veer's newest journey, as he terms it.

This eclectic array adumbrates the creator's own thematic evolution, those art ideations that manifest independently of any preferred school of art or thought. 'Every art medium carries a dichotomy within it,' he remarks pensively, 'an inexpressible disharmony between the possibilities it possesses and the limitations innate to it.'

'Like love,' I smilingly interject.

'One can say so. Whenever I confront this disharmony impeding the expression of my ideas, when I realize that a single art form can't express them wholesomely, it leads me to explore mediums of expression, one after another. After all, art is global, its language and mediums are global, only our content makes it personal.'

His ebullient expression conveys succinctly that at a subliminal level, he considers these canvasses and paints his real earnings and accrued wealth. If his house were broken into, he says he would be more worried about the pillage of his paintings than of jewellery or money.

My eyes wander to his more recent work: an acrylic and handmade paper canvas. This is Veer's depiction of the 2010 disturbances in Kashmir that he witnessed up close. A singular contorted face, posited amidst the detritus of metallic splinters, like some meditatively rendered cri de coeur

put on canvas with the cumulative sorrow of those violent events. The nastaleeq lines a requiem for more than a hundred young lives lost.

II

‘I was a reactionary when I was forced to leave the Vale. Between my political and apolitical swings over the years, I tried grappling with my demons, borne of my own particularities.’ It was when Veer was invited to Paris, while scouring the images at Musée National Picasso, that he confronted the universality of suffering. There he came across the original pictures of the bombed-out city of Guernica whose destructive imagery had once upon a time so moved Picasso that he had put it upon his canvas in cubist art form. In that black-and-white photographic mélange, Veer self-realized. To quote his words, ‘The world is entropic, so to say, full of sorrows, and there are millions upon millions of fellow humans who have been exiled, disenfranchised, killed and bombed.’ This was the start of his re-engagement with politics, albeit with a lot of self-questioning. The confessional strains that he had harboured till then would now make an appearance through his versions of conceptual art.

What was he trying to capture and illustrate? I blurt an oxymoron—the vicious beauty of the world that makes it tick.

‘Perhaps, beyond this suffering, and in the humanity that is us Bosnia, Iraq, Rwanda are examples, but at an individual level of this suffering, we are powerless. In these big games, we are irrelevant as human beings. But here for me,’ Veer continues, ‘the tragedy was too close for comfort. Kashmir was my home. It was also a collective tragedy.’

Veer’s is an extremely well-primed mind, harmonizing with an artist’s sensitivity, I realize, borne of hardship and labour well-rewarded in time. A decade before his exile, Veer was desperate to head home to Kashmir; his strong innate sense of belonging and destiny led him to reject lucrative offers in Delhi after graduating from Baroda Art School in 1981. A conceptualist trained in narrative art, he knew he could paint well. This combination of imagination and skill made him nurture dreams of avant-garde works and art corridors in a place that didn’t possess any. But given the Vale’s provincialized and undeveloped settings, his intentions and ideas and efforts came to naught. Disheartened by the bureaucratic red tape seeking government funding to set up an art gallery, he opted for and was

rejected for a teacher's job at the local art college on a flimsy pretext. But he didn't let the feeling of being victimized as a minority community member deter him or push him to seek recourse through some form of affirmative action. He helped the newly built Mass Communications department in the Kashmir University with their first magazine issue, set up his own studio in a rented accommodation in Karan Nagar and started designing miscellaneous stuff—cards, logos, even propaganda posters for the ruling NC party during elections—the work bringing in the much-needed cash to keep his ambitious ventures afloat. 'It was my first mature foray into human interaction and from my staff I learnt that intelligence doesn't require formal education.' He was making enough to make ends meet, he had a girlfriend and his art held promise. And then 1990 occurred.

III

In October 1947, Veer's mother, still in her adolescent years, watched in horror as Pathan tribesman overran her hometown of Baramulla in North Kashmir and butchered her father. The rest of the family eventually shifted to Srinagar and as far as Solan in Himachal.

In January 1990, as the night air in Srinagar was rent with sounds of Islamic and pro-freedom slogans, his mother's memory led them to fear a reprise of her 1947 tragedy. The womenfolk were directed to ensconce themselves in the attic. Precious heirlooms and household jewellery were tucked into the safer and deeper confines of the home. Eventually nothing happened, but the atmosphere seemed dire and ominous with signs of bad days to come.

My mind veers off back in time, to that winter of 1990. I remember people talking of and joining nocturnal mosque assemblies in droves. In the words of the protestors and in the loudspeaker-aided sloganeering was a reprise of the forms of protest adopted by the Iranian masses at the time of their revolt against the Shah in 1978-79. They were taking a leaf out of Khomeini's book, quite literally, I supposed in hindsight.

'Even if the sloganeering and loudspeaker utterances were not aimed at frightening our community…' Veer's pauses, then calmly offers his own insight, 'They provoked a contrary effect.' In his opinion, minorities anywhere carry their own baggage, their own way of looking at things. 'A desultory paranoia took hold of us, as did resigned thoughts of redemption

in escape. The questions racked our brains, but no one offered satisfactory answers. If a concerted campaign to cleanse the Vale of Kashmiri Pandits did exist, let us presume as a sideshow conjunct to the violent mass uprising that was unfolding, what power on earth or state could prevent a tragedy, given the frenzy around? The selective targeting of individuals was already in place, and because we were soft targets, the fear was pervasive and palpable. When Judge N.K. Ganjoo—who had sentenced JKLF founder Maqbool Bhat to death—was shot on the street, I inadvertently saw the whole scene from a building close by; I took it in my stride. But when Lassa Koul, the TV station director, was shot dead a few months later, the dread hit home. I knew him personally. It was very unnerving.'

Years on, as he comes across many people putting the vexed politics of the issue within a Kashmiri Pandit–Kashmiri Muslim paradigm, he baulks at the incorrect picture, as well as fallacious logic, being propagated. 'If that was the case, the Kashmir issue would have been sorted out years ago and wouldn't have lingered a quarter century on,' he says.

I compare this to the many obtrusive voices from the Kashmiri Pandit narratives that hog social and other media, which can alienate even well-meaning individuals, including me. I haven't been able to guess what drives individuals to render a vitriolic argumentation, or ally themselves with the many bigoted voices in the Indian polity.

Even as the conflict's ramifications compel many non-Kashmiri and non-Muslim individuals to criticize the policies of inflicting disproportionate violence on to the Vale's denizens in the public domains. To find Kashmiri Pandit become part of the overweening efforts of those voices who buttress the obfuscating and prevaricating narratives that the state peddles to cover up its mishandling of the situation, to an individual like me, appears as crass venality.

'Doesn't this indicate a schizoid and incorrect understanding?' I ask.

'An inchoate response can only bring about chaos. While the Jagmohan theory isn't entirely correct, he couldn't have persuaded people to migrate en masse. Being an admin guy rather than a visionary, his setting up of migrant camps in Jammu seemed to be an overwhelming attractive invite to a "happy" exile. The migration could have been averted if administrative will existed, but there was a state of flux. And as usual the Kashmiri Pandit community, being true to their grain, behaved in a highly individualistic manner. One should also keep in mind that over the years the chasm

between them and the majority community had developed and deepened.' He reminiscences how his community elders always told him and others to steer clear of the trouble spots in the old city. This wilful ignorance of the background of the conflagrations left many of the Kashmiri Pandits with no option but to view the advent of the armed militancy as a conspiracy. 'But then the Kashmiri Pandits' migration served everyone's purpose, so no one objected,' he adds.

In those days, the armed underground approached Veer to assist them in starting up their samizdat press. He asked for materials, which served as a breather to stop the militants knocking on his doors. In the meantime, he whisked himself away to a cousin's place in Solan. He had a sense of foreboding as he crossed the Banihal tunnel. He says, 'Something inside told me that I wouldn't be back for a long time to come; that thought terrified me.'

Meanwhile, his family too had migrated to Jammu. He hopped on to a bus and rushed to the cramped rented quarters where his parents were staying. He came face-to-face with the pettiness of their landlord whose overbearing behaviour was inexplicable. He wasn't alone in this observation; stories of the local people's highhandedness and sadism abounded in the migrant community. Even the vegetable hawkers and milk vendors fleeced the unwary migrants.

A life-altering realization awaited Veer when he arrived in Delhi to commence a nomadic stint in his life. He was penniless and lacked a fixed address, spending his nights either in public parks or in the Mandi House dorm. A chance encounter with Brinda Karat—prominent Communist leader and campaigner for gender issues—and her recommendation opened some doors. A portrait requisition gave him the break he needed to paint again and earn some money to afford decent food. But there was a hitch; he lacked the facilities of a proper studio to restart what he loved to do.

He was unable to find a place for his easel after arriving at the Ghari studio, a workplace and a haunt for many a budding artist in those days in South Delhi. Desperate, he put his easel and canvas on a side street and commenced work. A few days later, an established artist let him share her own studio space. Browsing through the newspaper a few days later, he was anguished to find his picture beneath a news item in which this 'benefactor' had proudly and ostentatiously advertised her altruism in 'helping' Kashmiri refugees.

She had a social agenda, an angle in helping Veer out, but its price was too steep for his self-regard to pay. ‘It took me some time to get here. But this incident made me promise myself that unlike others, I was never ever going to play a victim card or seek sympathy. I would channel the extreme distress I was going through at being left without a roof over my head into my work. I wanted expression for my pain, I didn’t want to be pitied.’

II

Veer knew he was navigating a different domain now. His technique had been honed by his stint in art school and he wasn’t bereft of ideas. After much soul-searching, he set about maintaining a diary, which eventually emerged as a personal record in paint of himself, his people and his birthplace. Through his art he now sought his ever-elusive inner satisfaction and release. Many of his works from that time depict overarching themes of displacement and exile. One canvas shows three huddled figures with a holdall, as if talking in muted tones, while in the foreground a sloganeer shouts from a rooftop. A kanger or traditional firepot is shown secured by a rope, an appendage to the holdall. ‘This ubiquitous fire-holding vessel shows our strain of culture, which is getting displaced alongside us,’ says Veer. Another painting shows a motley group of men and women in varied attires ranging from dandyesque to ordinary, waiting to register at a relief camp. The painting was inspired by a real event, he says; he had spotted some technocrats and academics, known and connected figures in the community, who were standing in the hot sun to register for relief.

‘Exile democratizes fate by ironing out previous privileges,’ he says. But I see a deeper meaning here that I don’t divulge to Veer, which he is illustrating beautifully; handouts also mean a defeat of the individual ego; you forego your name, achievement and connections to subsist. He was slightly pleased with his progress, but cut-off from his family, he felt lonely. As luck would have it, he bumped into his old girlfriend while loitering in Connaught Place. She too had migrated to Delhi along with her family. Old feelings reignited and intensified by the exile led them to resume their relationship even though living a hand-to-mouth existence. He thought that luck was smiling on him enough to let him lead a normal life. For the time being. To find a measure of privacy and a sense of togetherness with her he ended his dormitory existence and moved into a rented room. But this

serendipitous turn of events didn't last long. His big dreams were no substitute for the solid criterion that Kashmiri marriage eligibility is predicated on. Her parents refused. His matrimonial disentitlement would dog him relentlessly, even as his parents tried desperately to matchmake with prospective proposals.

'Traditional Kashmiri society places a high premium on technocrats working well-paying sinecures, who make a lot of money without having to move a muscle,' he surmised, derisive of his own community. He had gleaned that the community's lack of an intellectual/artistic corpus had come about by their affording themselves a cocoon of smug complacence that only the intellectual sweep of their stamp-sized canvas of the mediocre variety could have allowed. This aptly denied the next generation any measure of meaningful intellectual, social and political participation. In the bigger picture, the patronage system in place in the Vale had also aborted the emergence of real artists and genuine artistic, literary and academic figures.

He at least knew he wasn't going to be one of them. This was the last straw on the camel's back. He reneged on his promise made to his mother and immersed himself in his work, diverting his emotional energies towards his artwork.

Art for him was a serious matter. He was unheeding of both commercial venture offers from dilettantes and experts parsing his work. He realized he wasn't someone who could dovetail anyone en route to success. Veer turned his canvas into a reflection on life and now he had to determine what his contribution as an artist should be. He realized, however unpleasant the experience might have been for him, that he was on the cusp of history. 'All I needed to do was to utilize my own experience for good so that it attained the shape of a narrative art form.'

III

Still based in Delhi, Veer's promising work grabbed the attention of Ebrahim Alkazi, the renowned thespian. The preternatural personality that Kazi was led him to open up the doors of his prestigious Heritage Art Gallery to host Veer's first solo show in 1992. The show opened up the previously elusive art world for him, though he likened it to a self-test. Veer gained grudging acceptance, which in art aficionado territory meant

relegating oneself to the life of a mundane celebrity. In his view, his domains lay beyond being content with the shallowness of acceptability, given his propensity to risk the security offered by an assigned mould. This risk-taking tendency probably sprang from the worst days of his exile. He did a lot of shows throughout India and then invitations from abroad materialized.

He has been to twenty-seven countries by now. In Cuba, he collected Che Guevara pictures and memorabilia. In Karachi, he demurred from utilizing verbiage and offered no answers to the many patronizing queries about the paucity of such work in their environs.

It was SAHMAT, with its left-of-centre world view, which provided him with a platform to address the crux of the problems that were plaguing his thoughts for a long time. He had been a victim, but was averse to using victimhood as an identifying theme of his work. It was dawning on him that instead of seeking binaries, he needed to address the issue.

The first thing he did upon returning to Gujarat in the aftermath of the riots was to find his Muslim friends and classmates. ‘You know this minority bracket is dicey.’ I could understand the minority thing, the paranoia, the schizophrenic approach to life one develops. There is an element of gross immorality in using the pain and suffering of one minority to justify inflicting the same against another, that is my contention. So he asked many people politely not to use the exile and suffering of the Kashmiri Pandit community to justify the horrific atrocities committed during the anti-Muslim pogrom.

A few months later he arrived in Paris, and the Picasso episode happened. His own self-questioning and politics were congealing. Travelling to Jordan, he found a kindred spirit in his guide: a Palestinian by the name of Mohamed. Veer could fully grasp Mohamed’s verbalizing of his dilemmas; he found his horizons widening to encompass a larger perspective of personal tragedies. It made him understand the import of his mother’s suffering back in 1947. A single underestimation by her family and a decision to remain in Baramulla back then had led her to suffer a double migration. This has persistently been in the back of his mind. ‘Ultimately if a society foregoes its cosmopolitanism, what remains?’ he asks. ‘A society will suffer loss of culture, intellect and cohesion once it starts to lose its composition, but then political migrations and exile en masse have their own complicated dynamics.’

‘Which cannot be mitigated through individual reconciliation,’ I hasten to add.

‘Exactly. I took my mother back to her home in Kashmir.’ He displays a picture of her with a Muslim playmate from her childhood days. She is holding his arm. The old man in the picture has the telltale signs of suffering in his demeanour; Veer’s mother appears stoic. Collective tragedy, I surmise, two people in the picture, of the same age, suffering because of a conflict but in their own ways. But I don’t verbalize the thought in front of Veer. The next photograph is of her atop the Shanker Acharya temple hill, her hands folded in the direction of Srinagar city.

‘Nobody understands this uneducated orientation thrust upon us. We are always seen through prisms. Consider this: There has always been a dichotomy between the Kashmir that is physical and Bollywood’s gain, and the cultural world, its people, which has always been hidden away and never acknowledged.’

‘How do you envisage Kashmir now?’ I ask.

‘In all seasons.’ He plays a video he has shot of himself walking its environs in the four seasons; in the snow, in summer, in the autumn and winter traipsing through fallen chinar leaves. ‘I cannot recognize it anymore. Old heritage buildings are being demolished.’ He points to a blow-up of the Lal Ded school in the city, destroyed and encroached upon, but now luckily reclaimed. He went to his cousin’s house in Fateh Kadal, but his lens could only capture the starkness of it in winter.

‘Kashmir pervades my paintings,’ he shows me a slide of a painting termed ‘Lotuses and Helmets’; other paintings denote camouflaged soldiers with guns. His first painting, ‘A masked militant with a Kalashnikov on floating land’, as he terms it, came about in 1991. ‘Probably I’ve come full circle. But there are bigger issues there, and then I ask myself a question, where do I posit myself, as being in exile? One might say your community can’t define you as an individual.’

‘Isn’t that a stretch of imagination?’ to move beyond our identitarian moorings.

‘Conceptual art, yes, it is,’ he smiles. He shows me a conceptual art piece. It says, ‘I am a Kashmiri, what am I to you’. He turns around and smiles. The question probably sums it up for me. I take his leave.

On the subway, my mind wanders back to a 1980 issue of *TIME* magazine that I stumbled upon last year while sorting through my late

father’s library. It covered Ronald Reagan’s election that year. Leafing through it, I found a feature on the then octogenarian Salvador Dali’s comeback. The eccentric artist had evocatively started his speech with lines borrowed from a medieval Catalan poet, ‘I said I would return when the swords have flowered.’

In Veer’s case, the flowering of swords in his home forced him into exile, but it also made his art bloom.

Jaffna Street

'Mi barrio ya no existe.' ['My neighbourhood doesn't exist anymore.']

CARLITO BRIGANTE, Carlito's Way (1993)

IN THE EARLY 1980s, *Newsweek* and *Time* periodicals making their way into our home extensively covered the insurgencies and wars plaguing El Salvador and Nicaragua, and piqued my adolescent inquisitiveness. The coverage fuelled one's curiosity about the suffering of the people, given the sheer precariousness of the lives being lived in these two countries. Given my schoolboy's naïve earnestness, I empathized with and sometimes even pitied the people of these countries.

It was about the same time that *Vengeance the Dog*, an Argentinian film dubbed in English, ran to packed houses in Srinagar. The schoolboy grapevine was abuzz with talk of the two-minute porn clip featured in the movie. Like many of my school and batchmates I too ventured in for a peek, out of curiosity. The clip apart, the film's content shocked me. The plot revolved around the travails of a political prisoner in some South American banana republic. A left-wing academic imprisoned by a repressive right-wing military junta escapes while being shifted from prison. The fugitive is relentlessly pursued by the very intelligent but bloodthirsty army dog, after his handler, an army tracker, is bludgeoned to death by the prisoner while attempting escape. At a personal level, for a teenaged schoolgoing kid, it was shocking to watch the sheer cruelty, the stifling of dissent, and the arbitrary arrests and killings depicted in the film.

On my way back home from the movie, little did I know that a couple of years down the line I would gain a firsthand, personalized experience of the sinister environs and paranoia that insurgency and conflict engender.

In 1990, insurgency broke out in the Vale. The war started in the urban areas with insurgents attacking soldiers billeted in sandbag bunkers and armoured vehicles, day and night. Even as the night sky in Srinagar lit up every now and then as countless tracer rounds pierced it, the vicarious dread I had felt years back would make their way back into my mind propelling comparisons between El Salvador and the Vale. The violence and the retaliatory state violence was mind-numbing, and came in repetitive cycles of ebb and flow.

At least for us downtowners, one could figure out who ruled or owned the streets. While every nook and corner had gun-wielding insurgents controlling everything, the main roads had Indian paramilitaries billeted in buildings or sandbag bunkers or conducting mobile patrols in armoured trucks or jeeps, presenting themselves as perpetual targets.

The abrupt breakout of firefight and rocket hits, cordon and search operations, arbitrary arrests, kidnapping and extortion always hovered in our mind. A paramilitary patrol could arrest one for wearing sneakers—Action shoes Force 10 were supposed to be an insurgent favourite. New, hitherto unknown words entered the vernacular lexicon: AK-47s, grenades, LMGs, rocket launchers, catch and kill, crackdowns, torture, custodial killings, Papa 1, Papa 2, to name a few. Given the fact that our area was a frontline in this war, the news and aftermath of the variegated forms of violence hit one like a gale every morning. The army raids, militant ambushes and pursuits, or their fear, compelled many of us, myself included, to stay indoors. Every night, we would try to reset our mind's clocks to contend with the new challenges posed by the oppressive, violent events battering our already besieged psyches.

The city's green-lined roads and dusty labyrinths felt obdurately dirty, desiccated and dying. I was in college at the time. Most of us would finish our classes, go on drives and eat corn on the cob at the lakefront. This was the least we could do to keep our minds healthy. The violence ensured that an avoidant psychology took root in the populace. Many people turned spiritual or religious, others immersed themselves in cocktails of benzodiazepines and opioid derivatives.

At a personal level, days would pass before I would find the courage to walk a street or a locality where some horridly violent event had occurred recently. But even then, walking with ease was difficult given the lurking fear of getting caught in some cataclysmic event no matter where one went.

I

Jaffna peninsula, in northern Sri Lanka, has been much in the news since the mid-1980s when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) started their war against the Sri Lankan state and then, the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). Its recurrent mentions in the news had made it a recognizable name, a place known to be a Tamil rebel's stronghold, doggedly defended even as their endless war carried on.

In 1995, even as the Vale descended into a horrendous bloodletting fifth year of the insurgency, the back streets of Noor Bagh—a suburb of Safa Kadal, three miles from the Srinagar city centre where my family lived, emerged as a veritable militant stronghold. Usually invisible, this new lot of militants, buttressed by a motley group of Pakistani and Afghan fighters, held sway over a swathe of this western end of Srinagar downtown. Operating from this base, the insurgents regularly carried out deadly IED and machine-gun attacks on the army and the paramilitary soldiers. The entry point, the first few furlongs to this intersection that connected the locality to the Eidgah area, was nicknamed Jaffna Street by the locals.

The area was notorious, having earned its violent spurs in the previous years. On 8 October 1990, the entire Nalamaar Road belt, located in the downtown area, erupted in armed clashes. Starting from the Kawdor area, two miles east of us as the crow flies, pitched battles erupted; the day commenced with a broad daylight ambush on Indian paramilitary vehicles that left many soldiers dead. The clashes lasted the whole day, spreading to the western end of the road by evening.

The clashes in Kawdor died down even as flames consumed the neighbourhood after enraged soldiers allegedly torched many houses. The insurgents then regrouped and opened up a new front in our area where they took a stand and fought the army and paramilitary tooth and nail till the afternoon of the next day.

The old city awoke, not having slept. Its motionless streets vibrating in a crescendo of grenade explosions, incessant machine gun clatter and assault rifle fire. By noon, the smoke engulfing the environs and the decreasing volume of gunfire meant that our locality too was up in flames. Gun-wielding militants were scampering for safety through the fields running parallel to the road, their Kalashnikov metal stocks still open. The

whole population of Noor Bagh, apprehensive of the impending carnage, fled towards the peripheral villages.

My mother, a remarkably brave woman, was stoic and silent, alarmed furrows marking her face. But dad spoke with a curious strained confidence, which I had never heard before. His voice betrayed a blend of caution and fear. Both of them had decided that if we were to die we would prefer to face our fate at our own hearth. So we stayed put.

It was on that day that I went through a surreal experience; facing a sort of entr'acte between life and death. A nauseating panic fuelled by mortal fear—that would reprise itself many a times in later years—was so overwhelming that it was hard to retain one's wakefulness, it was something I read years later that afflicts soldiers fighting in the trenches. Eventually the insurgents retreated and the Indian army troops moved in inch by inch. A neighbour's half-open window aroused the suspicions of an advancing troop column, which repeatedly machine-gunned the house from the boundaries of our farmhouse. Luckily no damage was inflicted on us.

By dusk of that ill-fated day, twelve civilians had been killed in our area. Feral dogs mauled the strewn corpses—there was no one to pick them up as the locality's populace had migrated to safer confines. Everyone had run away except us. The desolate old city, now awash in blood, was handed over to the army and put under strict shoot-at-sight curfew. The troops not only put up roadblocks but also billeted themselves in scores of abandoned houses for the many days to come. The soldiers were billeted in every downtown locality. The curfews were interspersed with incidents of olive-green jeep patrols dispersing assemblies of people busy in exchanging gossip and garnished accounts of watching insurgent fighters fighting pitched battles with the soldiers. General Zaki was the Indian Army Corps commander at the time.

The curfew was lifted three days later. As we ventured out into its silent motionless streets, we discovered to our horror that the hundred-odd metres of the Noor Bagh locality front had been reduced to a big mound of smouldering rubble. The houses had been levelled and incinerated by the fire that had consumed them in the absence of a fire-fighting intervention. I realized that we had been lucky compared to these neighbours who had been left with nothing but what they were wearing. But I also realized that the frenetic pace with which the ruined houses and disembowelled shops were rebuilt demonstrated a deep-rooted nature and the permanence of a

sense of belonging to their hearths felt by the denizens, even if lifespans were ephemeral.

Many known to us, both acquaintances and friends, became casualties as combatants and bystanders that year. A puny and soft-spoken fruit vendor, Imtiaz Tabardar, who had attended a Quranic school with me when I was a preteen, was killed on Eid morning at his cart-shop as paramilitary soldiers shot their way out of an ambush. Kaiser and Nazir, two stand-up lads, high school acquaintances, both still in their teen st, from downtown I came to know of their ingress into insurgency only after their deaths, when their pictures were featured in vernacular newspapers. The previous year, 1989, before the war broke out, several of us, them included, had been cornered and outnumbered in the downtown by-lanes by the backers of a wannabe boxer who had been whipped so badly as to be left unrecognizable by one of our buddies. I remember the nimble-fisted Kaiser taking the initiative, furtively removing from my back pocket and then donning the only knuckleduster we had between us and confronting the attackers to save the day. He was brave and hopelessly in love with a Kashmiri Pandit girl from Habba Kadal.

The cordon and search operations made their way into our area too. My family was forced into the confines of a Kashmiri Pandit cremation ground by the riverbank with the rest of the locality's population. We were face-to-face with men in camouflage fatigues riding olive-green jeeps loaded with spotters, their Kalashnikovs sleeker and of better design than those carried by the insurgents. The locals treated it like an unwanted picnic, kids trudging to and fro carrying kettles of warm tea and locally made oven bread. I tried to drown out the mix of boredom, unease and panic by delving deeper into Robert Ludlum's *The Aquitaine Progression,* which I had carried with me. Before the day ended, the soldiers guarding us had been fired upon from the opposite riverbank and they had called in reinforcements and were firing back. Another day of school life had gone to waste. The dreams of making pleasant adolescent memories had no space to come true. The city environs seemed writhing; my mum perpetually feared that her children might end up being part of the calamity around, I hated to see her tearful and angry at the same time. There was no mental or emotional solace, the book shops were running empty, the newspapers reported and rhetoriced around the dead and the dying. The music shops

sold nothing new, three days a week we switched on BBC's Multi-Track to catch up with the saner world.

The following year, in the autumn of 1991, unable to control the insurgency, the paramilitary soldiers transported the entire able-bodied population of the localities abutting the north embankment of the river, especially the Nalamaar belt, to the notorious Papa 1 interrogation centre situated in a frosty meadow next to the airport. In the grey autumnal cold, the fog of free-floating fear, suspicion and hatred permeated the agonizing hours that would decide our depressing fates. In this infernal absurdity I noticed the reflexive nervous gestures, the hedging and hesitation, the pervading diffidence, all a consequence of our self-preservation urges as we were forced to undergo identification parades in front of jeeps occupied by masked spotters or cats.*

In the following years, the city descended into a sanguinary Byzantine atmosphere, its core and ethos besieged by the onslaught of cycles of military crackdowns and insurgent violence.

The more motivated insurgents started to go deeper underground or shift to zones under their control. In the city, by 1993–94, the Batmalyun area emerged as a no-go zone where any attempt by Indian armed forces to go in or mop up was met with stiff resistance from the local boys who were known to be tough lads even before the war erupted. The clashes would last for days and many casualties were sustained.

But this defiance had a price. In 1994, during one of the many troop incursions into the locality, I watched scores of ambulances going in and out of the area even as machine gun and grenade fire rent the air. Both sides had sustained heavy casualties. The following day, as I stood talking to some of my friends in the Gow Kadal area abutting the city centre, I counted at least three coffins carrying the bodies of local boys who were militants embedded in that area being brought in. As I discovered, some were neighbours living near my grandmother's home. That day, at least eighteen local fighters belonging to various localities of the city-side area were taken to their final resting places.

On the other hand, guns also empowered previously proven poltroons to run their writ in the streets and localities of many downtown and civil lines areas. Many racketeering sorts added such big heists and deeds to their portfolios as would make Lucky Luciano proud. Some became hired guns for settling scores, others skimmed money from every deal going around.

One day, as I walked to and fro in our garden, wondering how life would recompense these long days misspent, I heard a loud commotion outside the gate. A boy was cringing in pain whilst trying to ward off and shield himself from the blows being rained on him by a group of hoods carrying guns. This skinny strabismus-afflicted teen shoeshine had protested their constant incursions into the nearby sweeper council estate. The fact that they picked on and beat this harmless individual to a pulp made me realize the kind of sickos this lot were.

II

My own family and extended clan couldn't have remained untouched in the violence. In late 1991, my paternal grandfather died after sustaining multiple gunshot injuries a few furlongs away from his home when he was caught in the middle of a firefight. In 1992, one of my father's cousins was allegedly shot in cold blood in front of his infant granddaughter as enraged paramilitary men went berserk after the deaths of two colleagues who had been fatally stabbed in Safa Kadal square earlier that day. On his funeral at our family cemetery I watched the eminent trade unionist and human rights advocate Hriday Nath Wanchoo speak of the incident as one more instance of trampling of citizen's rights by the Indian state. Another 'trade unionist' tried his firebrand oratory exhorting everyone present around to stand up and revolt, to the chagrin of what I saw was a deeply wounded clan going through bereavement. One of my irked uncles asked the 'trade unionist' that if he was exhorting then he should lead the march, to which the latter expressed his inability. In a casual conversation with cousins recalling the incident years later, I found that rhetoric spewing 'trade unionist' had now morphed into a pro-India mainstream politician. As for the sincere Mr Wanchoo, he was kidnapped and shot dead in broad daylight in Srinagar, few months later in October 1992.

A younger uncle suffered splinter injuries in a grenade attack on a bunker near the city centre, one of the splinters puncturing his left lung. His chest x-ray frightened me; a big metallic splinter had lodged itself 2 cm from his heart and the major blood vessels. Two uncles were involved in a scuffle with paramilitary personnel investigating an IED blast in an ice-cream factory owned by one of my uncles in Safa Kadal. Unbeknownst to anyone, a teenage lad, the only son of the local painter, had recently

returned after training in arms and blew himself up while rigging the bomb in a derelict shed on the factory premises. The paramilitary contingent blamed my uncles for the incident and the vociferous protestation turned violent. They were lucky; one can only surmise what they would have endured if it hadn't been their lucky day.

In November 1992, while on my way to a friend's place to indulge in our off and on loitering without intent, I got stuck in a cordon and search operation in his Zaina Kadal locality in the old city. We cowered in the lower floors of his big, old-style Shahijee Mansion, even as grenade blasts and machine-gun fire raked the air and hell broke loose. The gnawing fear of the unknown racked our nerves. We dreaded that the raiding troops, having suffered casualties, would break down the doors and drag both of us out to face an unearned grisly twist to our fate.

The shooting died down after an hour or so. Announcements over loudspeakers and megaphones from the nearby mosque blared, ordering us out of the houses. The instructions were terse and clear: a crackdown was in force and we were to assemble for the identification parade on the road opposite the Maharaj Gunj police station. Intermittent gunfire and grenade blasts were still rending the air and echoing in our ears as I hurriedly changed into my friend's casual pathani suit and ventured out of the house along with him. Scores of olive-green jeeps and armoured cars were crowding the streets. The angry glares of the heavily armed soldiers in their camouflage fatigues who were swarming the streets made it fairly obvious that they were edgy. Even as we joined the large assembling crowd our fright dissipated, probably in the realization that this hour of torment wasn't ours alone to bear.

On that drab winter morning, we sat on the cold asphalt of the streets as the soldiers eyed us scornfully. The derision was mutual, on one side concealed on the other not so concealed. The crowd's sullen gazes seemed like it was ruing, over the collective dislocation from cloistered existences and the perpetual fear unhinging our individual selves. Embodying the anxiety, humiliation and bitterness was a slightly older though wispy lad sitting next to me. His clothes were slathered with blood and he casually talked of how the soldiers had forced him to move the bodies of two insurgents who had died in the firefight in one of the back alleys and it was their blood that had splattered his clothes.

For two consecutive days we were forced into a bracketed existence, braving the cold and occasional drizzle, oblivious to the rest of the world and the city itself. We were forced to sit where we were, trying to be inconspicuous so as not to warrant any attention that would lead to a belting session. Like lad after lad of our age detained during the identification parade and questioned at a makeshift interrogation centre, I had the precarious feeling of being the next target myself. On the evening of the first day, the local radio announced the death of Hamid Sheikh, a ranking insurgent leader. He had died fleeing the cordon in a boat, which capsized when the ensuing firefight riddled his boat with bullets.

The cordon was lifted on the evening of the second day. A tall wiry officer addressed us. According to the officer, two of his soldiers enforcing the cordon had sustained shrapnel injuries after an old woman had hurled a fragmentation grenade at them from a side alley. The woman had done so to retard the advance of his troops and provide a breather to the insurgents attempting to break their army encirclement. On his command the rest of his troops had restrained their retaliatory fire. He informed us that the incident wasn't a one-off case or a freak accident, and he was fairly certain that even the husband of the woman, who was in the cordon, was in the know of it. The officer then paused and delivered his punch line; the troops, having completed the cordon and search operation, were now leaving the locality, but the assembled people were to be under no illusion that any such restraint in the face of further attacks would be shown in the future. At this juncture the soldiers in public view proceeded to chamber their guns before climbing into their trucks and leaving.

The officer's declamation didn't surprise me. There were many elderly women who covered retreats, fetched intelligence and led protests, and sometimes acted as liaisons between civilians and insurgents, vetting them before letting them pass. Many of these women had sons in the insurgent ranks. These insurgent matriarchs almost always kept a low profile and had no time for pontificating speeches or political spaces. In time they faded from view.

III

As I have mentioned earlier, prior to the branding of Jaffna Street, our area was notorious, constantly attracting search operations. In the summer of

1992 the security apparatus launched ‘Operation Tiger’, which achieved notoriety for allegedly bumping off insurgents rather than capturing them. The operation was initiated from our Noor Bagh area and its first casualty was a local lad, a big fish, a much-wanted insurgent leader of the Al Umar insurgent group that controlled the entire downtown area. Earlier that same night, our next-door neighbour, Yusuf, an affable and mild-mannered artisan, died in a concomitant raid by the Indian armed forces to trap a group of armed insurgents. Giving no heed to his or his parent’s protestations, the militants had forcibly entered his home to stay the night.

Weeks before, my sibling and I had finagled our way out of another army cordon using our exam slips. Allowed at first to leave, we were then detained along with a host of others at the Noor Bagh chowk. An autorickshaw driver who had inadvertently walked into the cordon had been forced to sit under a horse cart.

Irate soldiers playfully made our release from the cordoned area conditional on our setting the range plates of their AK 47 rifles to the correct measure; a sure way of self-implicating. In the afternoon sun we watched in trepidation as the soldiers cursed and accused us of studying during the day and fighting them at night.

But afterwards, with the changing contours, even as foreign fighters started pouring into the Kashmir theatre of operations and Srinagar itself, the assassinations of former militants and people accused of snitching were regularly carried out by a new insurgent crop. Ironically, though, the spate of extortions and carjacking that had been the norm ceased. The racketeer insurgent lot steered clear of our area for fear of being shot in broad daylight.

The increase in insurgent activity again led to an increased level of cordon and search operations and arrests by the paramilitaries and the military. Their lack of hard intelligence led to indiscriminate and random arrests; many of my own friends and acquaintances were also taken in and had to weather vicious interrogation techniques in makeshift detention centres during the two- to three-day mopping operations. Many had to be carried home, so broken and battered, unable to even stand. Many a times I thanked my stars for never having to go through these ordeals.

In June 1995, I stood in the large crowd in the main square on Nalamaar Road. My previous attendances in the cordon and search operations had left me with a sunburnt face and arms so I was trying to find a place to perch

and protect myself from the summer sun, which in a few hours would attain a furious face, enough to melt the surface of the tarmac road.

What I hadn't considered was that my dandyish though worn-out attire, complete with Lacoste and Levi's components, would mark me out in the crowd. Within moments, a young officer in cammies wigwagged his fingers, signalling me to come forward. Ever the cocky person I was in those days, I blurted, 'What am I supposed to do,' in English. The officer retorted in a serious tone, 'I will let you know.'

I stood there, watching the terrifying but normalized rigmarole of identification parades with masked spotters in the military jeeps deciding the fate of the denizens. A dozen or so men were randomly picked and assigned to search parties. I was one of them. The officers leading the searches briefed us on our tasks; we were to enter the homes first and look for any insurgents and then come out and report to the soldiers. If fighting ensued because we did not inform them of insurgent presence, then we were firmly told that 'we would end up as first corpses in the accreted body count' of the ensuing clash. It was then that I realized that we were human shields, bait to draw out the foreign insurgents suspected to be ensconced in the locality, whose forbidding fighting reputations and suicidal zeal gave the other side nightmares. I prayed fervently to avoid being assigned to the area around Jaffna Street, as the probability of contact and fighting was far higher there. The searches went on and I was assigned to the first area of entry to the locality.

After the searches, we were made to sit in the shade. A lone machine-gun wielding army man guarding us bragged of having shot down five Afghans in a firefight the previous week. Even as he spoke, gunfire and explosions raked the periphery, with militants trying to either frighten or target the soldiers from outside the cordon. We envisaged beatings from the troops, instead we were subjected to a lecture declaiming that the militants and the supporting populace were traitors to the nation-building project that had commenced with the Mughal Emperor Akbar. That India had more Muslims in its population than Pakistan and scores of kings and saints belonging to the faith were buried in every nook and corner of the land. An unlettered man sitting next to me muttered, 'Don't they know that Akbar is considered an invader and a usurper here?'

Epilogue

As 1990s ushered in, the denizens of the Vale would never be the same again. A quarter century on, it looks as though the violent dynamics unfolding in every street, the paranoia, the unabating traumatic stress, the distrust, the memories of those lost and wounded, the ironies upset a peculiar balance at an individual level. The violent haze irreversibly altered the intersections between the older social order, our own private worlds and its meaningful moments, as we came forward to experience redefined notions of empathy, ego and harmony, self, others that the negative intimacies and the darkling moods begotten by violence fostered in us and others in the badland that our city would become.

The deceased buildings, more in Kawdor and few in Noor Bagh, stretched out in a long line with their decrepit façade of repugnant-looking, wan masonry forms but a part of littered detritus of the most violent phase of the war. Their spectral decrepitude, interspersed with the inchoate blend of praise, blames, regrets, defiance, condescension in private or public, by spoken word or print, on the idiot boxes or memorialized pages and the elegies for the dead at every nook and corner remind me often of our fragmentary collective memories which seem inadequate to fully reckon with the enormity, painful experiences, the unremitting brutality and the causation of the conflict. No wonder apart from the inveterate sentiment, the consequential political non sequitur and the entropic runs of its violent consequences preclude a coherent explanatory narrative a quarter century on.

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[*] Cats/spotters: Informants, usually previously arrested militants, coerced into identifying their comrades and sympathizers. Later, willing informants recruited would also be utilized the same way.

The Hitman

The race is not for the swift, nor the battle for the strong, but time and chance happens to them all. Fate's hand falls suddenly, who can say when it falls?

TAPA, *Munich* (2005)

ONE RAIN-DRENCHED AFTERNOON in 1991, a group of masked men made their way to a local draper's shop a furlong or so away from my home and raked it with machine-gun fire. Its proprietor Abdus Salam died instantaneously. A crowd of openly aggrieved mourners assembled near the downed shutters of his shop.

A family man with small children to feed, the squat, bearded middle-aged Salam made a living selling and sewing fabrics. He was also a known Jamaat-e-Islami sympathizer and had been in the crosshairs of the police for more than a decade for his ideological loyalties. At the inception of insurgency, his talk made it clear that a renewed sense of mission pervaded him. But he was more of an over-ground sympathizer, maybe a stir-it-up sort of figure made the surety of his ingress into violent militant domains debatable.

That the assassination had been carried out with prejudice using machine guns in broad daylight rather than stealthily with pistols was a message driven home; a warning that Salam's noncombatant status was irrelevant. His ideological affiliation was enough to place him beyond a shadow line, where anything was permitted. The times were such and precarious indeed.

His killers were members of an opposing tanzeem who, unable to challenge the hegemony of the Jamaat-affiliated Hizb, increasingly resorted to bumping off its unarmed sympathizers. Over the previous days this group

had seen the decimation of its firepower and was itching to retaliate after one of its cadres was shot dead in a shootout.

A few weeks after Salam's death, the women in the neighbourhood wrung their hands in despair as they saw his barely teenaged daughter reopen the shop and try her hand at selling its merchandise.

I

The inter-tanzeem feuds started quite early on—before and after the counter-insurgents started their killing forays in the first winter of the insurgency. At that juncture, proponents of various ideological hues limited their mutual derision to spewing vitriol in the vernacular press where the insurgents' voice held sway through coercive tactics.

Turf wars disguised under the veneer of ideological differences led to murder and killings by the middle of 1991. The draper was one of the victims of a drama whose genesis lay beyond the geographical domains of the conflict-ridden Vale.

The heady days of 1990 whence organizational affiliation was irrelevant had met their waterloo. The reasons at that time were extraneous rather than from within. Across the LoC, the Pakistani intelligence establishment, pursuing their own long-term strategic interests, started to cut arms and financial aid to the groups they considered ideologically or politically unreliable in favour of those deemed to be distinctly pro-Pakistan. Many of the groups that fell into disfavour had attained a consequence in the insurgency domains and saw themselves as spearheads of the insurgency. The modicum of popularity that they had gained by advocating for an independent state soon faded in the face of lack of arms and desertions. As the pro-Pakistan groups, which were much stronger in the countryside, started asserting themselves through area domination—which sometimes descended into pure brutality—these pro-Independence groups, especially those based in urban areas, violently resisted their moves of dominating their turf or forcible amalgamation into their ranks.

On the ground itself, the Indian state had responded to the insurgency with a heavy hand. They inundated the Vale with hundreds of thousands of troops and in the process inflicted indiscriminate violence that failed to distinguish between civilians and combatants. On the other hand, most of the prominent insurgent groups within the city were patterned on gangs,

where one buddy joined in and brought with him a chain of acquaintances. Within a couple of years, the discipline of the many insurgent groups in the city started to burst at seams.

Lacking superior training and tactics, many boys had lost their lives and limbs fighting the far better trained and equipped Indian forces, which were becoming increasingly adept at countering them on the ground and absorbing casualties, had steadily gained an upper hand.

Given the stark choices, which restricted the lifespan of an active urban insurgent to less than two years after his first action, many of them slowly and consciously turned away from their primary aim of targeting the soldiers in an urban guerrilla campaign. Instead, loath to abdicate the notion of power—which overwhelming public support and sophisticated weaponry had accreted in their hands—they realised they didn't have it in necessary measure to fight the Indians, increasingly sought to exercise it in other ways. Other surmised that many of these groups were slowly but steadily getting infiltrated by the Indian counter-intelligence sleepers or recruits whose activities had started to stir the ranks. However, I think it was a blend of the two.

The motivated urban insurgents, smaller in number, dug deeper underground and avoided crossing the paths of the former shady compromised lot for their own good. Excluded by the rest, this increasingly criminalized lot and their 'Say So' ruled the streets and one had to keep one's head down to avoid trouble. Killings and revenge killings had crept into the dynamics of the insurgency, to protect rackets or havens and mainstays.

There were no checks and balances on these depredations; neither was any respect accorded to age, education, gender or family name or to any other traditional parameters. Within a few years, a lot had changed, as illustrated by the following incident. A former insurgent recently released from jail, a pioneer of sorts, his body pockmarked by war wounds sustained in an encounter, was fed up with the turf fights. He came out of his house one day to reprimand a group of combatants only to have a gun pointed at him by a bandana-wearing teen who hurled the choicest abuses at him. This pioneering former insurgent thought it better to indulge in discretion rather than foolhardy valour. The insurgency had changed colours and having learnt a bitter lesson, he thought it better to mind his own business.

On the contrary, the pro-Pakistan groups, which held sway in much of the countryside, were conditioned to some extent by religious-political ideologies and were intent on establishing physical domination in their areas. They had a strict operational hierarchy. Over-ground commissars served as liaisons with the population and a religiously motivated cadre equipped with plenty of weapons helped them to not only carry on an extended war but also absorb the attrition levels better.

Turf wars took on many forms and were fought over many a reason, ranging from killing and maiming each other over petty spoils like the hides of animals slaughtered on Eid to fighting over extortion bids.

Hold-ups became the norm and so did kidnappings for ransom. Bizarre stories started making the rounds as to how enterprising foot soldiers and bigwigs within many organizations ripped off their own organizations in what can only be absurdly termed as ‘patriotic pillage’. If we are to believe the word on the street, one enterprising fellow pilfered a neat five million rupees from the coffers of his organization to start a new life somewhere else while another depleted his party’s funds by a neat three-and-a-half million rupees. He admitted to the embezzlement after a sound beating by his own cadres who got suspicious when new and expensive furniture made its appearance in his home. Armed robberies and shakedowns propelled hitherto lumpen proletarian individuals into millionaire clubs and brought their victims close to destitution.

Of course the civilian populace had to shut up; the guns made sure that every atrocity or larceny was overlooked and rationalized as ‘service to the cause’. For the civilians, many roads became no-go zones given the perennial carjacking and kidnapping instances. The same populace also bore the brunt of human rights violations and the endless mental torture of summary arrests and cordon and search operations by the armed forces chasing these militiamen.

II

The first internecine fight I witnessed was fought along the edge of our farmhouse. I could discern the viciousness displayed by the warring groups. The cadre of a city-based insurgent group chased the cadre of a pro-Pakistan tanzeem, and upon catching them, beat them up. On the road, the aggressors blamed unseen hands for creating ‘misunderstanding’.

By mid-1991, events had taken an even more serious fratricidal turn. The pro-Pakistan elements with their rural reinforcements fought back the pro-Independence militants in yet another round of fighting. The better-armed and organized pro-Pakistan tanzeem won the round squarely. A militant, a local boy from an opposing tanzeem, was killed and the local baker lost her thumb after a stray bullet hit her hand. Electric poles and trees bore the brunt of the shootouts. When the fighting died down, the commander of the pro-Pakistan tanzeem, a bearded, diminutive and wiry man in an off-white kameez shalwar made an appearance. He was unarmed, unlike his retinue who were armed to the teeth with Kalashnikovs and RPGs. He publicly castigated the other tanzeem, declaring them thieves obsessed with self-perpetuation and aggrandisement rather than a struggle for freedom.

In the inner city neighbourhoods, gruesome sights greeted one. In the twilight, I watched a man being beaten up and thrown alive into a shallow grave. It was the timely imploring of neighbours that saved this unfortunate individual's life. An acquaintance—the son of a dentist—had the entire facade of his house destroyed by machine-gun fire for dilly-dallying on extortion payments and refusing to part with his car, which these louts wanted for a joyride. I came across instances when the deaths of notorious gunmen of this variety through encounter killings—whether staged or genuine or internecine—were greeted with a sense of relief and glee by the populace.

I myself sustained a black eye during a fight. Literally barehanded, armed with only a knuckleduster, I tried to ward off a gang of armed men attempting to kidnap my young teenage cousin who had earlier slapped one of them for attempting to bully him.

What enraged me further was the class angle behind it as I noticed the obvious pride with which the relatives of these lumpen hoods recounted the incident. Another day, while I was away attending college, my father's official car was hijacked. Given his inability to pander to the imperious behaviour of the hijackers or take diktats, he slapped the most vociferous of the lot and then pounced on him. When I came home, I was enraged when I noticed the scratch marks on his neck, but ironically, he was brimming with gusto for having stood his ground and fighting back. Given his age I thought he would have been more circumspect, but his anger had boiled over I guess.

On another occasion, he was accosted in his office by a well-known insurgent sympathizer, who ordered him to divert the revenue earnings of the excise and taxation department to him on pain of death. Dad was exasperated and taken aback by the level of ignorance this extortionist exhibited about the workings of the government's revenue collection. As luck would have it, even as my father parried threats from this buffoon, army personnel secured the office while a ranking officer stepped in with an application for expediting their monthly excise permits. The extortionist, thinking he was trapped, fainted in my father's office and was led out by the orderly and never came back.

Other turf wars were the consequence of the resentment engendered by tanzeems making creeping advances into the strongholds of other tanzeems. One pro-Pakistan tanzeem, having built its formidable arsenal in the countryside, sought inroads into the city, while at the same time violently rebuffing any challenge to its claim on the monopoly of violence. For them, the very existence of the other militias interfered with their long-term plans to take over the insurgency totally and convert it into a monolithic movement, just as the LTTE had done within the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka. In one bizarre incident, one of the pioneering figures of this powerful group was so fed up with the egregious behaviour of a city-based insurgent figure that he invaded the latter's downtown turf, conducting house to house searches for him. This tendency to browbeat and dominate others would have far-reaching albeit negative results for this big tanzeem in the times to come and spur the advent of counter- insurgents.

III

One man, though, stood out in these feuds. 'N' belonged to the old city, borne into a family of limited means, unlettered, but endowed with a tough build and a quarrelsome nature, which saw him survive the bleakness of the streets and the paucity of his means. He tried his hand at many trades before finding his vocation in the black marketing of cinema tickets. After the war started, N joined the insurgent ranks. Although not trained in Pakistan, he rapidly rose to prominence thanks to an alleged hit that claimed the lives of two soldiers during a search and cordon operation, and another incident when he ruthlessly shot and crippled one of his cadre in public for molesting a local girl.

Afterwards, he was in the thick of the internecine battles. He would almost always be found in the vanguard of every scrimmage, every skirmish that his tanzeem fought to protect its turf. Money or accumulating it wasn't his passion, but creating a feared persona was probably his opium. He could often be seen walking the streets with aplomb, smug and high on his misbegotten fame, his persona itself a challenge to anyone who dared challenge him. His self-image embodied the tanzeem itself, for whom he was a kind of Knight Templar.

It was early 1992 when my own family too had to suffer some consequences of N's violent streak. I was visiting Jammu with my father when we came to know that my younger brother had escaped being shot by inches. N had summarily executed an insurgent from another warring tanzeem after an inter-tanzeem fight broke out near our farmhouse. The mates of the dead insurgent tried to enter our property to carjack our vehicle for ferrying their comrade to the hospital. Since the gates were locked, they shot at them with their Kalashnikovs. My brother, who knew that refusal to hand over the car would invite reprisal, disregarded my mother's advice and came out to hand them the keys. Two bullets struck the wall next to where he stood. With great presence of mind he shouted out, asking them to halt their fire.

The car was eventually returned, its clutch plate destroyed and blood slathered all over the upholstery, the hospital prescription slip still within. The bullet holes in the gate created a cloud of suspicion and army personnel subjected our home to an extensive and disruptive search during a cordon operation many weeks later.

These 'shoot first talk later' killings created an aura of fear and tough invincibility around N, and he probably revelled in it. His superiors indulged him and were astute enough to pin the responsibility of even their share of killings in turf wars on N's shoulders. He gladly accepted this since in his view this burnished his image as a hitman.

I came across N many a times on the streets where I lived and in other parts of downtown, and surprisingly, often on the campuses of medical schools, flaunting a rifle and sometimes a butcher's blade for effect. My closest brush with him was on my medical schoolbus where he was threatening a senior, who was the son of a well-known religio-political party figure with strong links to the major pro-Pakistan tanzeem against whom N seemed to carry a perpetual grudge. This barely-out-of-his-teens

student cowered as N delivered his overly abusive and threatening monologue. Even as he threatened him, another student happened to drive her cousin's car out of the campus at high speed. The miffed cousin hurled a stone after the car, which hit the college's main gate. The sound startled N and in a fit of rage he ordered his right-hand man to straighten out the stone thrower. With a classmate next to me, I watched N's accomplice pummel the guy—ironically known on the campus for his effusive courtesy and kind-spiritedness and, not to forget, trendy fashion sense—leaving him battered and sprawled, spreadeagled, with his nose spurting blood all over his clothes and the dusty medical school grounds.

I sat in the bus, like others, pretending to be some naïf, engrossed in my books. But I did snatch a good look at N and let me confess there was something about him, an upsetting presence, something sinister behind something totally human. His disconcerting aura, perhaps melded to the massive build and a very intimidating sense of mission perhaps made him impose himself so strongly on others. Though he appeared human, it was also as if he had suffered some gene mutation that drove him to act as if driven by extreme nihilistic possibilities that human nature craved to indulge if left unbridled and untempered by the thought of repercussions, costs and thoughts of the next unpredictable morrow. But now years later, I realize that he was merely a reflection of the times, a tiny speck on a multi-layered firmament of anarchy that wreaked sorrows, robbing society—comprising both its Swells, as well as its Proles—of its optimism, its irony, its courage, calm and good cheer carried within for long by its well-meaning soul.

IV

N had actively fought against one of the largest, most motivated tanzeems and had successfully denied them a foothold in the old city. He had repeatedly and violently culled their cadre even though the tanzeem was known to show no mercy to its opponents. N had an innate disregard for any risk to his life.

By the fall of 1993, when N's fame and power peaked, his powerful enemies amongst various insurgent groups were already making their moves against him, waiting for an opportune moment to square N's accounts and give him his comeuppance. Everyone had long predicted that

given the bad blood, his foes would not be content with anything less than the metaphorical triumphant parading of his severed head on a spike. One autumn evening of 1993, his foes finally swooped down on him with such meticulous alacrity that it left both civilians and insurgents alike bewildered.

If he hadn't brushed off the warning given by a shopkeeper earlier that day in his own neighbourhood, he might have survived to tell his tale. In N's stronghold, the presence of a posse of around a dozen unknown faces armed to the teeth, ostensibly preparing for a massive attack on the paramilitary forces billeted in sandbagged bunkers, led to a shutdown of traffic and the market bustle within minutes. The attack on the bunkers never came about, but N walked straight into an ambush. N's imperious recklessness goaded him to walk ahead after instructing his two bodyguards to use grenades and rifle fire to enfilade any assassins who dared attack. His bodyguards deserted him the moment the first volley was fired at them. Shot in the torso and legs, N limply dragged himself into a nearby lane where a woman, both horrified by his wounds, as well as moved by his imploration for water, provided him a full tumbler. Within moments his assassins found him, and such was their hatred for him that they not only shot him again but also smashed his skull with bricks. N's saga, which had sustained itself for over two years, thus met with a gory and violent end.

Zee, the lapsed guerrilla, recalled how many years before the war he had thrashed N during a visit to the cinema. N, then a black marketer of cinema tickets, had reneged on the agreed price, which had led to an altercation. The fight saw Zee get the better of N, beating him senseless with a willow stave.

'N was a tough hood, small time at that!' Zee remarked pensively. 'But he was different; compared to his ilk he had a higher degree of stepped-up arrogance and self-absorption. You can say, he stood out among his crowd. But like everyone, he too had a break point. I could never have predicted as I left him battered and senseless that in years to come he would morph into such a dreaded figure. But those times were different, there were no Kalashnikovs then.'

Surprisingly, N had taken time off and had married. He had a child too. His wife, in a break from tradition, attended his wake. His Man Friday, who had beaten up a fellow student in front of me, was shot dead years later on suspicion of being a snitch. By that time he was living a second life, having

excused himself from his past, but many opined that his past had come calling.

V

It was 1995. Apart from bearing the brunt of the daily, unceasing attacks on soldiers and bunkers, our area had also turned into a haven for racketeers and extortionists. Daily life had become a nightmare in the uncertainty of not knowing what new challenges this criminal crowd with their violent acts would throw at you. I remember the sheer helplessness exhibited on the faces of the police when I went to lodge a report after our house was burgled and plundered.

But by that time, foreign fighters had begun their influx into the Vale. And since it was impossible for them to sustain themselves in the low temperatures and snows of the mountains, they were desperate to create a sanitized stronghold within habited areas.

Unbeknownst to us, the lowly powerless civilians, many of the heavily motivated local boys with fighting tendencies, fed up of watching their families being harassed by soldiers and Mafiosi-insurgents alike, made a beeline for the mountainous where they were seconded to foreign fighters. These boys then cut their teeth in tough combat in the countryside, fighting their way out of massive combing offensives launched by the Indian army in the Wular lake area and the Badgam highlands.

The contras or counter-insurgency that had gathered steam in the countryside hadn’t been able to make inroads into the old city. Instead, the native boys, increasingly confident because of their fighting acumen, returned to their hearths with the foreign fighters in tow. This was the nucleus that fought the next phase of the insurgency.

An innocuous incident in the locality made it apparent that these armed gangs operating in the city had been suborned and infiltrated by Indian counter-intelligence. One night an armed duo, known pestiferous criminal sorts, masquerading as insurgents, forced their way into the boudoir of the daughter of one of our neighbours. In a bid to silence the terrifying shrieks of the family members, the duo chambered their guns and threatened to shoot them. Their screams attracted the attention of a neighbourhood lad, an insurgent fighter embedded in a foreign fighters’ group, who was sleeping in his own home. He grabbed his Kalashnikov, rushed to the bewailing

neighbour's home and let loose a volley of bullets on the two attackers, who fled for their lives. The girl's honour was preserved but two days later, the home of the lad who had attacked the duo was raided by the Indian paramilitary forces. The hitherto unknown insurgent's cover had been blown.

This turn of events convinced the local components to come around to agreeing with the foreign fighters' contention that many of the existing militants were turncoats, whose nosing about and existence itself posed a serious risk to their operations and lives. Wiping them out needed to be accorded priority, before these criminals morphed into counter-insurgents. To this end, there was a spate of murders and assassinations of this older generation of militants. The armed duo that had assaulted the girl were also marked for assassination. In the winter of 1995, even as people gathered for the annual Shab-i-Baraat prayers for the night, they were ambushed some distance away from Jaffna Street. Both made a run for it; while one managed to escape, the other one was summarily executed and left hanging on the barbed wire fence that separated the vast vegetable fields.

There was a hitch again. The locality was far from cleansed for the foreign fighters to move in; another group running rackets and intimidating people had so deeply imbedded itself in the area that it would take a serious skirmish to flush them out.

It had snowed heavily in the preceding days and the sky was overcast when the heavy internecine fighting began. My parents, worried to death, asked me to leave the area, given their apprehension that the paramilitary contingents billeted around the locality might intervene and, as usual, would not distinguish between combatant and non-combatant. I left and by the time I returned, the mobster-militant lot had been thoroughly mauled by the zeal and superior firepower of the motivated insurgent fighters. The leader of the mobsters, whose venal depredations had made living in the locality a misery, had donned a flak jacket and brandishing a Kalashnikov, had challenged the opposing fighters to a duel. His abusive shouting continued till a high-powered sniper rifle bullet, shot from the local mosque's minaret, hit him, stopping him in his tracks. Blood spurting like a fountain from his shattered leg and ankle, he knew his game was over. That was the last time that the area ever saw him or his fighters. The shooter later confided to the locals that a last minute surge of pity had prevented him from blowing out the mobster's brains.

All over the old city neighbourhoods a veritable calm descended as the mobsters disappeared for their own safety. Their extortion rackets and carjacking incidents ceased. The irony lay in the fact that this sense of tentative security was provided by the acts of people who themselves were insurgent fighters. The victors of this bout were decimated in turn by the combined onslaught of the Indian armed forces and counter-insurgents in the next phase.

Walking home during a visit to Srinagar in 2012, I came across one of the most feared veterans of the insurgency and internecine fights. He had spent a good part of a decade in jail before being released and now ran the local provision shop. As I walked by his shop, I saw him standing within, dismay and helplessness writ large on his face at his inability to calm his five-year-old child who was repeatedly punching his legs for being refused an ice cream. Walking by was another chap of my age who had been an insurgent in his teen years. His limp gave away the prosthesis that he wore. Years ago his left leg had been amputated after sustaining serious injuries in an ambush laid by an opposing tanzeem even after a truce had been called. He smiled and shook my hand. He too had picked up his life and moved on, he told me. He now made a living driving a school van.

I walked on, wondering at the resilience and triumph of the human spirit and the quest to build our own utopias, however imperfect they might be, after sustaining a tragedy.

‘Guests’ and Contras

The jihadists had proved themselves over many years as the one force able to frighten, flummox and bog down the Hindu-dominated Indian army. About a dozen Indian divisions had been tied up in Kashmir during the late 1990s to suppress a few thousand well-trained, paradise-seeking Islamist guerrillas. What more could Pakistan ask? The jihadist guerrillas were a more practical day-to-day strategic defense against Indian hegemony than even a nuclear bomb.

STEVE COLL, *Ghost Wars* (2005)

THE AUTUMN OF 1993 saw Indian army troops besiege Srinagar city’s venerated Hazratbal shrine, trapping the armed insurgents who had taken shelter inside and coercing them to surrender. The tense hair-trigger standoff at the shrine lasted more than a month, paralysing the whole city and much of the countryside, especially Bijbehara/Vejbyor town where scores of demonstrators were killed by paramilitary personnel. The crisis attracted plenty of press coverage from local and international media, even as negotiations to defuse the situation were under way.

Late one evening as the crisis unfolded, the local state-run TV station ran a news clip parading a Pakistani insurgent, Nasrullah Manzur Langriyal. The capture of this former Afghan war veteran in the higher reaches of south Kashmir by Indian paratroopers was considered to be significant. His mixed band of foreign and local insurgents operating under the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen banner had carried out deadly attacks on Indian armed forces’ convoys, patrols and billets on the main highway. One of their actions saw them carry out a massive swarming attack that wiped out a long-range paramilitary patrol in the south Kashmir highlands.

Flanked by the Indian army men guarding him, the manacled, curly-haired and bearded Langriyal, originally a resident of Jalalpur Jattan, Pakistani Punjab, was unusually calm and stoic as he recounted his battlefield exploits in Punjabi-inflected Urdu. His martial prowess had accreted after paying a high physical price in the nine years (1983–1992) he had served in Afghanistan— an armoured Soviet personnel carrier had crushed his legs. The many years spent in explosive-laden battlefields was evidenced by his apparent deafness, which, along with his dropped pistol, in his opinion, had led to his seizure.

Sitting in Srinagar one could hardly believe that this middle-aged man had attained cult status in the highlands of south Kashmir. But he wasn't alone.

Within some weeks of his capture, south Kashmir—Langriyal's operating area—saw the surreptitious arrival of the organization's ideologue, Maulana Masood Azhar; a Pakistani militant cleric with an explicit mission of forging unity between various Harkat factions operating in Kashmir and unifying them into a single organization. Given the bazaar-like culture in the Vale, the word on the street was that attending the meeting by his side were Sajjad Khan alias Afghani, another guest fighter who had created a name for himself while operating in Srinagar, and another Langriyal's—deputy Amjad Bilal, whom south Kashmir denizens remember as a wiry individual closely resembling Ahmed Shah Massoud, the famous Afghan Tajik Mujahideen commander, in both features and attire. Azhar along with Sajjad Afghani was arrested by a paramilitary patrol within hours after the meet concluded. The concerted effort of his organization to seek his release from Indian jails led to the infamous Al Faran kidnapping: the taking hostage and disappearance of five Western hostages in the upper reaches of south Kashmir and subsequently the Indian Airlines IC-814 hijack that saw Masood's release secured in Kandahar. While Azhar was drawn into limelite by the cable TV coverage in India, the many Kashmir lads who had come across him in jail while themselves serving their sentences remembered him more as a faith healer and an occasional firebrand rhetorician of the Islamist variety.

I

Even as Kabul fell in 1992 and Afghanistan descended into civil war, the foreign combatants—many of them unwanted by their own governments—fighting on the Mujahideen side found themselves in a quandary, and headed towards Bosnia and other hotspots. In 1993, bowing to Western pressure, the Benazir Bhutto-led government in Pakistan resorted to forcible evacuation and deportation of foreign Afghan war vets from their Af-Pak border camps in Pakistan. A small minority of these stateless fighters—Arabs, Chechens, Turks, Bangladeshis and Burmese—reached Kashmir, adding to the ranks of Pakistani and Afghan fighters making a beeline to fight in the Kashmir Vale. Their ingress was meant to buttress the Kashmiri insurgents and provide a sharper edge to their fighting effort against the Indian armed forces, who had been increasingly gaining an upper hand.

Within days of their arrival in and spread into various parts of the Kashmir Vale, in autumn of 1992, the foreign fighters hit the ground running fighting pitched battles with the Indian Army. These conflagrations erupted everywhere from downtown to the city suburbs and in the countryside, lasting days on end, creating an aura of determined fighters for themselves. Their first confirmed fighting presence came in early 1993 in an incident involving a high profile hit that resulted in injuries to an Indian major general. According to newspaper reports, he was trying to negotiate their surrender in a cordon and search operation in north Kashmir. But the other officers accompanying the general weren't as lucky and lost their lives.

The foreign component added renewed vigour and muscle to the insurgency. Whether in the cities or the villages, these fighters never surrendered, usually fighting till the very end, preferring last stands in houses, which were usually reduced to scorched shells by mortar fire and the explosives used by their opponents. They especially targeted army and paramilitary convoys. For two years—1993 and 1994—stretches of the Jammu–Srinagar highway in south Kashmir became their favoured ambush zones, where they inflicted significant casualties on the Indian forces. In the city, hidden away from everyone's gaze they were likened to ghosts, moving mostly at night. Many of the 'guests', as the foreign fighters were called, achieved cult figure status, like the Afghan insurgent Akbar Qureshi, the de-facto head of the Hizbul Mujahideen tanzeem at Sopur. He cleaved Sopur from the north of Kashmir and created a kind of liberated zone where insurgents had a free reign until after his death in late 1993. Qureshi's

cohort, a Sudanese engineer and Afghan War vet named Ibn Masud, took over after Qureshi died and held out for much longer than Qureshi before he too went down fighting. Retaking Sopur saw the Indian army use helicopters and armoured personnel carriers in a show of force, while avoiding pitched battles.

In south Kashmir, Verinag-Kokarnag belt, a Pakistani fighter of Pashtun origin, Haroun Khan, aka Mast Gul, and his men used their heavy weapon firepower and fighting skills to create a sort of a liberated area. Gul created a name for himself, and his antics and peculiarly provincial machismo saw him being propelled into the limelight. Unlike the more low-key Langriyal, Gul's pictures appeared prominently in the newspapers. In the videos that aired on the television as well as in print media, he presented a larger-than-life, walking-talking provocation and a picture of defiance to the Indian state.

The dominance of these foreign fighters would have remained unabated had it not been for the rise of the contras. The nascent counter-insurgency project was subterranean at first, but received a fillip in 1994 after Qazi Nisar, the Mirwaiz of south Kashmir, was kidnapped by unidentified gunmen and shot dead in murky circumstances. On that fateful summer day as people watched in disbelief, the mourners raised slogans, particularly against Gul's tanzeem Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Pakistan, squarely blaming them for the cleric's killing. Before matters got out of hand, it is said that Mast Gul paraded his men through the town as a show of force to intimidate the detractors and nip in the bud any thought of going against them.

But it was just a matter of time before what was widely perceived to be an internecine war turned out to be a well thought out and planned Indian counter-insurgency project that nearly destroyed the insurgency in the Vale. The contras first targeted the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen tanzeem's over-ground commissars, who bore the brunt of the counter-insurgency operation in its first phase. The local component of the insurgents suffered severe attrition and depletion due to the actions of both the Indian security agencies and the buoyed contras. The foreign fighters were forced to leave their urban and rural strongholds, and move higher into the mountains to join the comrades and there from continue the war efforts. In the coming months and years, the Pir Panjal mountain region of Doda, along with Poonch and Rajouri turned into major insurgency battlefields. Mast Gul though had other plans or directives.

II

The heavy snowfall in the winter of 1994–95 coincided with the Ramadan fasting that year. Afterwards the heavy cloud cover gave way to blinding sunlight reflecting off the accumulated snow berms that were still hampering movement, slowing the traffic to a crawl. The medical school was closed for the winter break and I sat at Nazir Gaash's shopfront with his usual retinue listening to him discuss the salient features of Teilhard de Chardin's and Kierkegaard's ideations. In between sips of hot coffee he pushed forward a newspaper's editorial page for my attention. An opinion piece on the advent and successes of a new Afghan militia were featured prominently. The militia was overrunning the former warlords in Afghanistan, bringing about a semblance of peace. They had named themselves Taliban, being students from the many madrassas who had come together vowing to free Afghanistan from the violent domination by rogue militias and end the consequent chronic state of lawlessness.

As I scoured the news report, Fazil, the former Ranji cricketer, joined us. Sitting next to me, wrapped in a heavy tartan blanket, he lit a cigarette and shared an interesting tale. He talked of how the erstwhile mainstream politicians, including his maternal uncle the one time Chief Minister Ghulam Muhammad Shah—also Farooq Abdullah's brother-in-law—were being incessantly approached by the intelligence-bureaucratic combine, trying to convince them to participate in elections being planned some time in the near future. Till then renewed efforts by the central government to install a local facade to their military-bureaucratic combine tasked with administering the Vale had been thwarted with almost all the pro-India politicians either in hibernation or cooling their heels in exile after being driven to irrelevance by the insurgency. Political reachout aimed at people saw central ministers like Rajesh Pilot making forays into the Vale. His incessant efforts saw him venture into areas deemed no go zones and in one incident insurgents ambushed his cavalcade in the heart of Srinagar.

But there was something else that Fazil couldn't make sense of at the same time. A trip to north Kashmir had rattled his businessman friends as he explained to Nazir Gaash.

Armed men with shifty loyalties were swamping areas in north Kashmir, and were living and operating in harmony with the Indian armed forces they had been fighting previously. Having surrendered, these

counter-insurgents exercised a free rein over the area, enjoying full immunity as they viciously hunted down and drove out their former comrades in arms, the anti-Indian insurgents.

Little did I fathom that this would be the start of an intensely violent phase of the conflict that would exacerbate the existing anarchy. A new meat grinder had been installed.

At about the same time in the 1994–1995 winter, Mast Gul, along with his group of foreign insurgents and local fighters, appeared surreptitiously in the hilly Charar-e-Sharif town—famous for the shrine of the Vale's patron saint Sheikh Nuruddin— in central Kashmir and openly set up camp. Within days, Mast Gul ambushed a paramilitary patrol killing many soldiers. This provoked the Indian security establishment to order a sizable contingent to besiege Charar-e-Sharif, hemming in Mast Gul and his men in an effort to force them into surrendering. Many observers were baffled as to his presence in a highly venerated and spiritually symbolic area.

The siege dragged on for two months, with neither side backing down. The efforts of negotiators and others who sought an early end came to a naught, even as Mast Gul mined the approaches to the whole town in anticipation of a full-fledged Indian army operation aimed at taking him and his men down.

Eid celebrations began, a conflagration broke out, with insurgents and Indian army's teams fighting their way in were locked in some of the fiercest battles. During the night, Mast Gul, escaping the Indian army's dragnet, was nowhere to be found. By the end of 11 May, the whole Charar town along with the centuries-old shrine with its venerated relics had been razed to the ground, with each side blaming the other for its immolation.

Two months later, in August, Pakistani newspapers covered the news of Mast Gul having ex-filtrated back into Pakistan successfully. Pictures of Gul, standing through an SUV sunroof next to Qazi Hussein Ahmed, the then Jamaat Islami Pakistan chief, and shaking hands with hordes of fans while holding a Krinkov rifle in the other hand were widely circulated. A legend had been created.

III

The city of Srinagar stands distinct from the homogenous mores of the rest of the Vale. For centuries the city was a veritable Oriental silk route

crossroad, which welcomed within its environs Turkic traders, Farsi-speaking mystic evangelists/scholastic sorts, mercenaries of the Afghan armies among others. This intermingling with the local populace over time saw local mores homogenize these eclectic influences to create a somewhat Persianized city culture—which held on through the dark days of the Dogra monarchy. Even as I grew up, the city's elderly cohort still quoted Hafez Shirazi and Rumi in their conversations. It was a close-knit community; a place where one hardly ever came across the homeless or the hungry.

Beyond the confines of the city in days past, given the depredations of the Dogra monarchy and its landed class, the peasant underclass barely survived their depressing circumstances. A series of customs checkpoints for levying octroi were specifically set up to prevent the rural folk, whom the urbanites regarded as a noxious provocation, from swamping the cities. Famines occurred at regular intervals, which saw segments of population head westward into Punjab where they gave rise to islands of Kashmir diaspora whose surnames are a pointer to their roots.

Post-1947, the city grew much beyond its eight bridges. The Land to the Tiller bill introduced by Sheikh Abdullah, the lord and master of the political domains, deprived the predominantly Hindu Dogras and Kashmiri Pandit landowning class of their holdings. Overnight a peasant-owner class came to the fore. Buoyed by their newly acquired economic strength, they weren't averse to competing for a new place in the still evolving neosocio-political order.

The educated city elite, assuredly placed within the social pecking order and whose avowedly ethno-confessional political aspirations made them contrarian, harboured a deep contempt for the peasants—for their grave looks and supposed gaucheness borne of uncomplicated lifestyles. As for the proles, their promised 'New Deal' of a better life and wages never came about, and they were yet to overcome the dazzling swim around Sheikh Abdullah's political archipelago. Both social groups watched the influx of the rural underclass, who were not only gaining economically, but were also receiving a better education, enabling them to apply for government jobs and the other usual preserves of the urbanites.

In 1953, Sheikh Abdullah was overthrown in an internal coup engineered by the then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who saw the former's overly smug hints at securing guarantees for an independent Kashmir and acts of harping on Kashmiri identity politics as out of line

blackmail. His successor Bakshi Ghulam Muhammad faced the ire of the urbanites for ‘betraying’ his mentor. Perhaps a better judge of men than his predecessor, he then sought ambitious hillbillies to create what many of his detractors would term a comprador class. This group saw itself profoundly changed almost overnight as they forced their way from their hovels and into the mansions and bungalows of urbanites whose pro-Pakistan sympathies had seen them being persecuted, forcibly exiled across the LoC by the previous regime.

This neo-urban class attracted the unconcealed derision of the urbanites, who saw their migration as a miscarriage of the promise of prosperity that the land grants legislated by Sheikh Abdullah’s Land to the Tiller programme had envisaged. Instead of making the Vale self-sufficient, it turned it into a dependent basket case. The city’s contentious bourgeoisie conformist core couldn’t gel with them because of the former’s deeply ingrained provincialism, heavy accents, inferiority complexes, self-deprecatory attitudes and abrasive fellow feeling. The urbanites suspicions about ‘philistines’ from the villages actively seeking to upend the preeminence of the city dwellers in every sphere perpetuated itself over a period of time, much to the distaste of the latter.

The vast majority of the countryside, however, never ventured forth into the city. Given their self-contained social patterns, settled history and the exploitative systems breathing down their necks, the peasants saw little merit in migrating enmasse and resisted change, and were perhaps as much disenfranchised by the Vale’s politics as the urbanites.

The insurgency, on the contrary, was a mutual project wherein insurgent camaraderie overcame long drawn social hostilities in a transitory truce. As the war engulfed the Vale, rural boys died fighting on the streets of Srinagar and city lads lost their lives on meadows and farmlands away from home. But as power-plays and one-upmanship eventually took a front seat, the rural versus urban divide saw much drama unfold. Given the fact that the counter-insurgents were rural boys, and based in north and south Kashmir, and weren’t able to make much inroads into the Srinagar city, their overly ruthless and indiscriminate brutal bid to wipe out the Hizb group who were predominantly rural boys, created shock-waves. While the rural folk bore much of the brunt of their depredations, the opinionated urbanites, fairly untouched and somewhat averse to nuance, decried the contra’s war against their own people as a betrayal. Another stark chapter exemplifying rural

fickle-mindedness; venality and the lust for power accrual at the cost of wider community interest.

IV

Even as the Charar crisis unfolded, a businessman friend of the Marxist Nazir Gaash talked of a nerve-racking calamity that had befallen him. Gunmen from north Kashmir had entered his factory on the outskirts of Srinagar city and impounded his jeep. The counter-insurgent group retained the name of its parent tanzeem, 'Ikhwan', and this was a silver lining, because many of its original Srinagar bigwigs were known to some of his acquaintances, so to say. But as the hijackers had come from the hinterlands the prospect of influencing them was very bleak. With a mix of apprehension and intimidation, the businessman sought the return of his vehicle from the tanzeem's city-based hierarchy.

A friend of his offered to help, unaware of the grey area he was walking into. This friend had direct access to the tanzeem's Srinagar-based commander whose loyalty to the separatist cause was above suspicion. The commander told them that the north Kashmir group had gone rogue and was at open war with the biggest and most powerful pro-Pakistan militant group, the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. He could at the most write a letter addressed to the head of these contras in north Kashmir. But the letter would be a request, not an order, borne of an optimism that old ties may still lead to a level of courtesy to help the two petitioners.

Both of them took the letter and ventured into the north Kashmir backwoods. The experience left them rattled. As they had surmised, the commander who had provided them with the letter was on the run for his life, moving from one hideout to another, constantly being hunted by the Indian paramilitaries, whereas these people were openly mingling and working in tandem with the Indian armed forces. The racketeer-militants he had previously engaged with and to whom he paid monthly protection money were powerless. Like the hoods who knew a more powerful fish was around, the racketeers too had to cultivate their own peace and steer clear.

Both had little inkling that they would soon come face-to-face with an individual who would change the face of the insurgency in the Vale. Yusuf Parray, aka Kukka Parray, had been a folk singer before being swept into the all-encompassing wave of militancy. His reason for morphing into a

contra had been the vicious internecine fighting and casualties imposed on the smaller groups by the largest pro-Pakistan insurgency group in the Vale, the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. Parray gave Gaash's friend a patient hearing, but still insisted that he part with the jeep. The portly counter-insurgent blamed his fancy for the vehicle, and to this end was willing to pay a nominal sum as a price. The petitioner businessman with his quick mind contended, as he was quite a known businessman, his vehicle being in the service would bracket him with sympathizers of Parray's group, a sure guarantee of making him might make him vulnerable to being targeted or face reprisals from Parray's enemies.

Contrary to the businessman's expectation, Parray acquiesced. He drove back to Srinagar in his jeep. At Gaash's shop front, he, with surprised visage, opined dourly that stealthily and unbeknownst to everyone, these uncouth peasant lads had morphed into a new pole of power in the Vale, which would extract their version of deference by stacking up new body counts. in this opinion the emergence of the contras was a game changer. Gaash with his Zen master's cynicism declaimed; 'Congratulations, we have a Rashid Dostum'—an apparent reference to the pro-Russian Afghan warlord—'in our midst.'

Within weeks his premonitions came true. The body counts around the countryside in both the north and south of the Vale started mounting. The contras shot and massacred both the cadres as well as the over-ground commissariat of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, the most powerful insurgent group in the Vale. The panicked stragglers from this targeted cohort of Jamaat Islami and Hizb cadres comprising both the victims and the threatened and underground scurried towards the capital city Srinagar, where they were hounded relentlessly by the security agencies.

The contras also started acting against politicians with separatist agendas. A top-rung separatist politician's house was rocketed, another's house was hit by a powerful car bomb. They then vented their ire on the now newly congealing separatist leadership who coveted the Hazratbal mosque. The separatists were attempting a reprise of Sheikh Abdullah's tactics—of using the mosque as both the Kashmiri identitarian symbol as well as a political platform to exhort the masses. In 1995, one Friday as I entered the university, a melee erupted on the Hazratbal road and gunfire raked the environs, sending the worshippers scurrying for cover. The contras entered the sanctum sanctorum and kicked out the newbie separatist

politicians waiting to address the worshippers from the mosque. There were no Friday mass prayers that day. An internecine clash the previous year had resulted in the prayers not being offered.

Later on, in the coming months, the Hazratbal shrine was taken over by another group of armed men, operating within the sights of the surrounding paramilitary pickets. A deluge of kidnappings, extortion bids and carjacks plaguing the city was rumoured to be the handiwork of this group. In 1996, this group overreached when it attempted to seize the Prophet's relic from the Hazratbal shrine. Two local policemen guarding the relic resisted the attempt and were shot dead. Within hours the Special Operations Group (SOG), a newly formed 'anti-terror unit' of the local police, cordoned the compound. This debutant force not only killed all the besieged gunmen, but also burnt their operating den down to the ground. The same police unit would in the future gain notoriety for its contribution to some of the most heinous human rights violations taking place in the Vale.

The newspapers and journalists who were at the beck and call of the insurgents, either through coercion or wilfully, were approached by the contras who demanded an equal amount of print coverage and space as that afforded to the insurgents. The demurral on the former's part invited daylight abductions and the journalists buckled.

In our own area, two boys purportedly met up with Parray, and with his blessing and backing, came out as pioneering counter-insurgents in the downtown area. But they got ahead of themselves when they hijacked a van and drove it around the Noor Bagh area shouting slogans in support of the contra leader. This show of defiance was perhaps too much for Jaffna Street's shadowy motivated insurgent lot. A day later the corpses of both of these lads were found in the back lanes. They had been bound and killed execution-style, with shots fired into the back of their heads.

Whether it was by chance or design or the social structure of downtown, the counter-insurgency engine didn't make the kind of scenario-altering strides there that it managed in the countryside.

Epilogue

It became fairly obvious that the 1995 siege of Charar-e-Sharif and the subsequent arson was another game of nerves played by the warring intelligence establishments of the two countries, India and Pakistan. One, to

successfully upend the game of the other, had created a major crisis. The efforts of the Indian government to hold elections in the Vale came to naught and the process got pushed back by a year or so.

Within the observer spaces, people in the city blamed the rural short-sightedness for the contra phenomenon. Others wondered why the insurgents never mounted a sustained offensive against the contras who had totally upended the insurgency's momentum. While many opined it was because of the sheer manpower and the government backing, bazaar gossip ran rife with rumours of a quid pro quo between the two countries, wherein India had agreed to scale down its support for the Mohajir militants who had turned Karachi into a virtual battleground in their renewed offensive against Benazir Bhutto's government in 1995 in return for the Pakistan-based strategic assets keeping their hands off the counter-insurgents in the Vale.

By 1995, as the contras cleared insurgents out from vast swathes of the countryside, a renewed push to restart a semblance of electoral processes in March of that year was envisaged by the security and bureaucratic establishment. Whatever the truth in this case, the bloodbath created conditions that were conducive enough for conducting elections by 1996, though minus the previous fanfare. The urban areas didn't vote, but rural areas did have a turnout. The whole valley was inundated with paramilitary soldiers to guard the polling stations; the Delhi-based *Outlook* magazine titled its cover story 'Forced Franchise'. The contras made heavy sacrifices to bring about a change of circumstances. It isn't known whether they had considered the possibility that they would be short-changed. Whether the contras knew beforehand that instead of them Farooq Abdullah would be vectored back to power fuelled by the investments of their blood is a matter of conjecture.

My tryst with adult franchise came a year or so later, when the parliamentary elections took place. It was late winter and the boycott call froze downtown. Unmindful, I came out to buy cigarettes and was chatting with friends when paramilitary patrols entered the area and started beating up everyone in sight. I along with a few friends rushed into the house of my father's friend, who lived nearby. But as ill luck would have it, we were spotted. The soldiers came rushing in and dragged out all three of us. My two friends got the worst of it. By the time my turn came, my heavily padded woollen wear and pheran absorbed the force of the wooden stave

blows being rained on me. Unable to watch me getting beaten up, my dad's friend tried to shield me with his body. I escaped, but he suffered a fractured elbow.

We then ran to the house of a friend who too had been beaten up. He hadn't been wearing any heavy clothing and his back revealed deep red weals. He turned around, grimacing in pain and watery eyed, and remarked cynically, 'Congrats, this is what "they" call democracy for you!'

A few days later, the great leader Farooq Abdullah's son Omar Abdullah was elected member of the Indian Parliament. In time, this feckless diffident sort of individual, living a distance from reality in the eyes of urban commentators, would preside over one of the worst family reigns that the denizens of the Vale could have imagined.

In 2003, in a daring raid on a cricket ground, pro-Pakistan militants ambushed and killed Parray, the contra pioneer, in his north Kashmir stronghold, even as he presided over a cricket match. At the time of his death, Parray was no longer the doppelganger of Afghan warlord Rashid Dostum as he was once widely ascribed to be within the Vale, but a crestfallen politician, a ghost of his former self. The new political dispensation he had actively helped bring to power disallowed him his preferred larger than life, influential role in events that fate had once granted him. His moment in the limelight that had seen him hog the pages and covers of news journals had been transient after all. His name, though, would remain etched into the collective memory of the war and I am sure will make its way into the pages of Kashmir's recent history, whenever any chronicler will seek to write a compendium on this war.

Mast Gul eventually ended up unwanted and unaccommodated by even the organization whose banners and slogans he had raised in the town of Charar. He finagled his way back into the limelight twenty odd years later, but ironically as an underling of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) fighting the Pakistan army rather than as their strategic asset this time. The photographs appearing in Pakistani newspapers displayed a much older Gul with a henna-daubed beard sitting next to a TTP commander, clutching a Kalashnikov, even as the latter pronounced the continuation of their war against the Pakistani state.

Pakistani newspapers traced Gul's trajectory, portraying him as the larger than life hero of the Charar-e-Sharif siege, feted by big support rallies and politicians upon his triumphant return, or alternatively as one

commentator recalled, a country bumpkin unable to handle the aftermath of his fame either by default or design. Others reviled him as a traitorous villain for Pakistan after his moment of glory failed to sustain or raise him to a pedestal.

People in the Vale who knew or saw him remember his intimidating presence as he walked the streets of south Kashmir dressed in a camouflage parka along with Bambaar Khan, his machine-gun-toting man Friday, and turbaned Afghan fighters in tow. Others would remember him for his gluttonous idiosyncrasies, which included sprinkling his favourite marinated chicken dish with rosewater before putting it to flame. The residents of Charar, though, would recall the heady morale-boosting slogan painted on the stone wall leading to the Charar shrine. The Urdu slogan, painted when Gul was hemmed in during the siege, declared 'Victory or Martyrdom for the Hordes of Hekmatyar', and survived the gutting of the shrine and his escape.

An acquaintance who had been an insurgent and had been arrested made an astute observation while reflecting on his life and times:

'On my arrest I thought the whole insurgency project was doomed. They would pick up the rest sooner or later, and that would be the end of the war. What my innocent sentimentality hadn't contended with was that in war, stakeholders, especially countries wanting to prolong the conflict for their own ends, emerge to seek their interests. The contras were part of the proxy war run by intelligence agencies of India against Pakistan intelligence's forays through armed militant organizations. The conflict prolonged itself with new faces and new dynamics emerging, and many of us old-timers realized that we were sitting on a powder keg created by ruthless and resourceful deep states embedded within India and Pakistan for which we had no match or brains to countenance back then. The tragedy was that we, who thought we had started it all, realized we were in no position to influence its dynamics or end it…'

Ganglands

'When the streets are mad at you she don't put you in a box, she puts you in a wheelchair.'

LANIN, *Carlito's Way* (1993)

JUDGE EDWIN TORRES' novel *After Hours* is a poignant tale of what befalls violent men who refuse deference to changed times and changed gangland realities. Drawn from Torres' childhood experiences in the impoverished barrios of New York City's Hispanic quarter where he grew up, the book depicts gangland reigns by tracing the trajectory of a fictional character, Carlito Brigante, an old-school Hispanic gangster operating out of New York's Spanish Harlem.

In *After Hours*, the main protagonist dies on a railway platform at the hands of a younger gangster even as he makes a dash for a supposedly new life with his waiting girlfriend. Its film version saw Al Pacino in the lead role.

In the 1970s in Srinagar city, a fine line existed between student gangs and professional gangsters, but over the years the lines got blurred. In the 1980s, as I stepped into adolescence, many gangs were operating out of Srinagar. There was an important difference though—there was small-scale racketeering, extortion, but the viciousness of big-city mafias or presence of crime syndicates wasn't there. Clashes to protect turf and for oneupmanship stirred some neighbourhoods from time to time. Knifings were uncommon, but murders were unknown. While stabbings were the forte of the professional gangsters, it was the student gangs that introduced knuckledusters, gun-waving and shooting during the 1970s. Not to mention the widespread use of drugs and a panoply of psychedelic substances, which earned some of them their nicknames.

From the beginning, the student-dominated gangs were both entangled with and bedazzled by the idealistic domains of separatist politics. Their overt participation in anti-establishment forays engendered an unspoken menace in the air that made the professional gangsters avoid crossing their paths. The 1970s student gangs gestating on the campus of Sri Pratap College had their names etched into public memories for a long time. Their pack leader, a gruff bearded student, had earned a fearsome reputation and a nickname, Mandrax, inspired from an episode involving a knockout mandrax overdose. He caught the public eye through a daring act committed during a students' demonstration against the proposed renaming of the local women's college in 1975. Even as female students poured out on to the streets to protest, he commandeered a bus—licence plate number JKB 291—from the nearby bus stand and along with other students, set it afire. The resultant skirmish with the police claimed the life of a student named Altaf, who was fired upon by the former to control the riotous students.

By the early 1980s, student gangs had acquired a parochial nature with gangs divided on the basis of locality or catchment area, each with their own loyalties. One interesting incident from this time occurred when Ashfaq Majid Wani, an upper-city student leader, miffed at the challenge posed by a local Punjabi Khatri community lad, ambushed the latter at the swimming pool of the famed Tyndale Biscoe School. The Khatri boy sustained serious injuries, but retained his senses enough to retaliate by open firing on his attackers.

The shooting left the attackers unscathed, but earned the shooter a stint in Srinagar's notorious Central Jail. Years later Ashfaq, by then a ranking founder-member of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, died fighting Indian troops in the Hawal area of downtown Srinagar in March 1990.

By the 1980s, gang clashes rocked the campuses as well as the city centre. Every time wayward Khatri boys tried to assert themselves or tough downtowners spread their wings, a wave of stabbings and shootings would sweep the city streets. The Gow Kadal–Batmalyuna axis on one side and the Dalgate gangs on the other relentlessly vied for control of the college campuses and the city centre. The Gow Kadal city-side boys were led by 'Mac', a wiry and charismatic former Sri Pratap College student. Under his stewardship, his boys developed a strong fighting spirit. Their proximity to the city centre and sheer numbers not only enabled them to hold sway over

the city centre but also to repeatedly and violently rebuff any attempts to force them to relinquish their control.

The clashes reached their nadir in April 1989, when the city-side boys attempted a violent ingress into the downtown area to settle a dispute involving a wealthy Khatri boy's admission to a college. They lost the first round to the local lads; in retaliation, they stabbed the downtown pack leader in the Regal cinema parking lot in broad daylight and looted the fruit kiosk of his accomplice. The police had to shoot a couple of rounds into the air to control the situation. The following morning, the newspapers carried photographs of the badly wounded downtowner being carried away by onlookers.

On Eid day in 1989, as I drove around the Dal Lake area with high school friends, street fighting engulfed the Boulevard and adjoining areas as the city-side boys attacked the Dalgate area in a free-for-all hegemonic foray. The Dalgate lads defended their territory spiritedly, leaving the city-side boys with no option but to flee the scene. They also viciously stabbed one of the city-side bigwigs, as a result of which many of the Dalgate boys had to disappear from the city centre for weeks afterwards fearing reprisals from the city-side boys.

Many of the city-side gang members, including their doughty leader, were on the police's radar for their recurrent involvement in violent, politically charged disturbances and stone-pelting incidents. Whether it be 14-15 August, or 13 July, Martyrs' Day, or any other politically volatile day of the year, this lot were both the usual suspects as well as prime candidates for preventive arrests. These toughs would appear in their respective area police stations with loaned VCRs and tapes to ward off the boredom of their lockup cells. Many of them would go on to join the initial wave of volunteers who ventured across the LoC for arms training, as well as be among the first batches of insurgents arrested after the war erupted in 1990.

I

Across the Amira Kadal bridge, a trio stood out. These three childhood buddies had chosen to carve their own path parallel to the overarching presence of the city-side boys. Like many of his mates, their point man 'M' had been born and brought up in a not-so-well-off family, but harboured an innate disdain for any display of the plebeian diffidence so common among

the older generation. He grew up unlettered but street-smart in the upper city-side ghetto and made a name for himself as a toughie in the lanes and by-lanes of the rough neighbourhood. To find his place in the world, he started out selling hand-me-down apparel in the flea market on the old Amira Kadal bridge. His skilful handling of a football secured him a permanent place in the city's prestigious JK Bank team. On the field, one saw him groom both his hairstyle and his field craft to appear as some Maradona doppelganger.

He was astute enough to dabble in business and make a quick buck. But he always appeared to dream beyond his self.

Unlike many of the city-side gangsters who wore their humble origins on their sleeves and never cared two hoots about their appearances, M's panache saw him cruising on his bike and donning the veneer of a dandy American high-school teen. He was overly generous to a profligate degree and like any other young man of his age, he wooed women, earned money and got into fights. Though he harboured ambitious dreams of carving his own niche in the ganglands, he astutely steered his triad's trajectory away from any premature clashes with larger gangs. In the winter of 1988, he graduated from fistfights and intimidation when his brutal knifing of a challenger in broad daylight hit the gangland headlines and the city grapevine. He had finally arrived.

In 1990, the insurgency spiralled out of control. Paradoxically, and unlike for others, guns held no allure for M, neither did the prospect of joining the raging rebellion. His cousin and one-time mentor did join the rebellion, achieving a formidable reputation in a very short time before getting killed in an accidental grenade explosion while cycling through the streets. Another of M's gang mates, a handsome bodybuilder, hopped across the LoC for training in arms and joined an old city-based militant group as a foot soldier on his return. The third mate, known for his artistic ambitions, attempted to join his family's retail business so as to be able to marry his well-padded girlfriend whose parents viewed the prospect of him marrying into their family with disfavour. This artist endured repeated arrests by the security agencies on suspicion of being a militant.

In the late summer of 1990, the insurgent bodybuilder buddy lost his life in a shootout, in suspicious circumstances that provoked speculations for years afterwards. M, married by then, sensed an opportunity when a new market came up around his own locality. His retail business had prospered

enough to enable him to wield a flamboyant public profile fuelled by a lifestyle of heavy spending, flashy cars and branded apparel.

My brush with M came about in unusual circumstances. Though we knew each other by face, we had never been formally introduced. In 1996, I purchased the recently launched Casio G-shock watch during a visit to Delhi. Much to my chagrin, a neighbourhood acquaintance, a known soccer player and a trusted flunky of M's, took an obsessive fancy to it. Not used to disagreements or my refusal to sell, he resorted to chicanery. As I hopped off the college bus one day, he asked to have a look at the watch, a request I conceded to for courtesy's sake, oblivious to the fact that he had left the requisite sum of money as payment at my home. He then abruptly kickstarted his bike and zoomed off, leaving me in the lurch.

My headstrong streak prompted me to seek repayment for his act. The next day, in between classes at the medical school, I watched him walk in with M, probably as a coercive tactic. As we sat face-to-face in the college canteen, M's otherwise sharp memory misidentified me as a former city-side gang member, which wasn't true; the confusion no doubt arose from the fact that in the late 1980s I usually hung out with many of its members including its pack leader, who after all, were the children of neighbours living around my mother's family home.

Much to the dismay of the watch snatcher, M did not indulge in any intimidation or cajoling, as had been expected of him. Instead, he berated his friend, declaiming that the latter had no concept of honour otherwise he wouldn't have broken the basic rule of respect amongst what the Mafiosi termed the 'wise guys'; a flattering label indeed, but I could tell that this was no patronization of someone younger. He was dead serious.

M proposed a deal involving a sum that was an overpayment for my watch; in addition, he offered his tent and his own watch. Seething with anger, I flatly refused. But like any man of honour, M respected the refusal, shook my hand and withdrew.

A couple of days later, when I went to the city-side area to visit my aged and infirm granny, I bumped into 'Mac', the old gang leader of the city-side boys. He had started a retail business to keep his kitchen fires burning after his release from jail. He had changed, I asked him if the the rumours on the street grapevine were true, that he was joining politics. 'No'; Mac made it clear that he loathed political forays. Given his overly Manichean outlook,

he refused to tip his cap for anyone, which precluded his placement in the separatist or any other polity.

Mac spoke his mind, demonstrating an astounding clarity with regard to the prevalent socio-political situation; his astute realism baffled me. He talked of the Byzantine adumbrate and its attendant anxieties, of deep states, competing intelligence agencies, and the murk, blackmail and slush money created. Insurgency veterans like him found peace of mind in this scenario by maintaining a hands-off low profile after release from incarceration. A fact borne out by their constant refusals to join one or the other hopelessly divided separatist cause parties.

It would be pertinent to mention this cohort of former militants political belief had transmuted itself in the everyday interest of the unfolding of political dialectics. But almost always the over-riding talk folded hovering round Everyman's wish list of families and raising children and suitable vocations. For them the politics of separatism had turned into activism unguided by influential thinking, bordering on a show of emotivism untempered by cerebration.

I surmised that his street fighting years had hardened Mac's self-worth and sense of achievement in a way that politics, in spite of its potential to endow power and fame, had failed to do. In his old-school belief, politicians would sooner or later acquire the shady hues of compromise. After their stints in jail, these hard-headed individuals were unlikely to indulge in anything that would corrode their already besieged sense of self or privacy.

We were swigging our regular chai single, talking seriously, when M dropped by. Stepping out of a sleek grey car with an obscenely expensive stereo system, he sat next to us on the shopfront. The conversation turned to the watch episode; M grumbled about my refusal of his offer, declaiming that the snub had incurred a loss of face. I firmly retorted that given his acolyte's egregious behaviour, there was no way I would have acceded to his request. To this, he rolled up his shirtsleeve to show off the latest and more expensive Casio model, ostensibly offering it to demonstrate his generosity of spirit. I declined, thanking him for his offer and ended the conversation by remarking that I was quite happy with what I possessed.

Soon, other former city-side old timers trickled in for a chat at the shop. Although everyone seemed to have their own personal tales of disaster, their conversation was peppered with persiflage, amusing enough to light up the many disconsolate faces among them. M, however, presented a total

contrast to the burnt-out eyes of the men seated around, as he unselfconsciously divagated from their conversation to describe his latest scrimmage. A couple of days prior, he had battered some uptown chaps into submission after their foolhardy attempt to badger him in a high-speed car chase on the expansive Boulevard road. His victims, affluent chaps with big hulking builds, ran a popular gym in the suburbs and were related to a well-off and connected draper and tailor in the city centre. M was livid at their gall and complained as such to Mac, the erstwhile city-side gang boss.

But amidst this banter I grabbed an introspective moment to realize that these dour and forbidding individuals with their cocky grins were actually purging their anxieties—not so much those arising from the odds of their physical and economic survival, but rather those borne of their increasingly maddening anger at the encroachment of their turfs. The world that they had lorded over prior to 1990 had undergone a jolting change of dynamics and had become passé for the time being.

The politically driven violent potpourri, propelled by the sentiments of personal loss, bereavement and disenfranchisement had created a self-regenerating space where unmitigated anger, vengeance and openly violent threats backed by automatic weapons were at the helm. In the background the insurgency—a veritable, perpetually running meat grinder—continued piling up counts of the dead. Both processes working in tandem had propelled pathologized life circles to a frighteningly banal level.

These gangsters were facing a creeping irrelevance and lack of respect from the newbies roaming the streets. I could sense the deep resentment in the gangsters' voices as they spoke of upending the small empires of previous jive asses propped up either by the insurgent riffraff or the contras whose writ now ran the streets. Many of these newbies resorted to racketeering to maximize the potential of their ephemeral glory time.

In time I would hear of the many hidings this group dealt upon the smug challengers, which led the former 'wise guys' to acquire a semblance of regained stature. The smashing of a glass mug over the head of an overbearing ice-cream shop owner, the rescuing of two cowering teenagers from a Johnny-come-lately gangster whose bravado was fuelled by his insurgent contacts, the mass beating of shopkeepers in the city centre were some of the acts in this direction. But these veterans also knew the dangers involved in a head-on confrontation with the bigger fish and bided their

time, waiting for an opportune moment, so as not to embark on a one-way journey leading to cemetery.

II

M continued his appearances on the football circuit and his flamboyant lifestyle with his sleek SUVs and flashy apparel till after the turn of the millennia. His various businesses kept the money pouring in. His occasional lucky streak in games of flash or his arbitrating of real estate disputes through arm-twisting raked in windfalls. But this didn't last long. While walking home one day, a fusillade of bullets was fired in his direction. On that day M discovered how vexing it was to live life on one's terms. Residing within environs where the franchise of violence had become democratized came with its own challenges. Luckily or intentionally, none of the bullets found their mark.

Every 'wise guy' surmised that the shooting attempt was a warning or a wake-up call. Over the following days, M, a habitual non-listener, unaccustomed to the epigrammatic consolations of his flunkies, turned into a brooder as self-worry consumed him. But he abhorred lying low and cooling his heels as advised by his street-smart gangster cohort, whose ears were firmly glued to the ground and who also warned him to opt out of any contentious deals. The city's slash-and-stab days were over; a mere look, a refused demand to part with even a belt buckle could put a man in the crosshairs or in an interrogation centre after being framed.

M, however, did not heed the counsel. Common sense, for M, meant complacence and restraint, a mark of cowardice. He refused to view the shooting attempt as a warning to stay away from a botched real estate deal. Instead, a frenzy of support built itself up through newspaper statements, with various separatist honchos willingly obliging him. M found his name across front pages, where all and sundry and the who's who of separatist columns vouched for his patriotic credentials and unblemished reputation when it came to sympathy for the cause of Kashmir's independence.

His peer group was aghast. They repeatedly told him that he wasn't in the midst of a sorority contest and needed to water down his tone and efforts. They reminded him that his bluster about him being in the crosshairs of insurgents would only get the wrong tongues to wag, and would put him at risk of getting sucked into a devouring meat grinder gone

amok. They advised him to dismiss the shooting as a minor affair borne of his recurrent contretemps and get on with his life. A shooting that didn't hit or hurt meant nothing in the murky environs where sometimes a dozen assassinations not making their way into newspaper headlines was the norm.

This perceptive reading of the situation by the gangster lot like Mac wasn't surprising. They were the people in the know, the only ones uniquely poised to know the bigger picture and deliver it. Their gang reigns had ended with the onset of the war, but their tenures in the insurgent domains and in prisons afterwards had given them a unique insight into a world where tens of millions of dollars in the form of slush funds were pouring in from every direction to both stymie, as well as fuel the conflict. The paradoxical boom in real estate and the luxuriant lifestyles being witnessed with the birth and rise of a nouveau riche class aggressively bent on accumulating power, wealth and prestige in the middle of wartime were prime examples of this misbegotten affluence. Chasing every damned nickel and dime of this newly spawned wealth were varied cabals answerable to no one but themselves.

The Byzantine world of the insurgency had sprouted shadowy cliques. These shadowy cliques ran and oversaw eclectic business interests, for and backed by putative dark forces whose convergences were incestuous and loyalties murky. It wasn't a tussle for imaginary turfs defined by big money, it was crony capitalism breeding on a dangerously criminal enterprise dealing in blood that had seeped into every sphere of the society. It was these cabals that were responsible for the many deaths unaccounted for by political or insurgent participation and it was what led the many motivated insurgents still in the fray and already under intense pressure to act in a trigger-happy manner.

But M, his plucky smiles betraying a sense of optimism crawling back into him, acted counter-intuitively. His blowhard nature abhorred drawdowns and fade-outs, inevitably setting the stage for his undoing.

III

Working an intern's routine shift at the local tertiary hospital, I noticed a crowd of familiar mournful faces lining the phenyl-soaked corridors outside the intensive care unit. Among the many old-time gang veterans present

was a particularly talkative sort known to me. He accompanied me to the doctor's eatery sited far down in the Siberian reaches of the hospital premises, where in a strangled tone he divulged that M had been shot multiple times at his retail shop in the upper city-side and had been admitted to this hospital.

The shooting incident sounded like a scene from a Hollywood film. Even as an unidentified motorbike-borne assailant walked towards M's shop without removing his helmet, M's watchful anticipation of danger—already stepped up by a couple of notches—made him instinctively realize he was in harm's way. With no escape route in sight, M, in full sight of his many flunkies, ducked under the wooden counter to save his life. The assailant calmly fired three pistol shots into the counter under which M was cowering and left. M's dazed friends, paralysed by the suddenness of the attack and the sense of their own endangered existence, took some time to regain their senses enough to drive M's limp body to the hospital.

I entered the ICU, where a heavily bandaged M was hooked to a ventilator with an array of fluid and vasopressor lines embedded in his veins to maintain his labile blood pressure and other vitals. The treatment chart divulged that one of the three bullets had severed his spinal cord. It was a grim prognosis by any standards. Even if M survived, he would be living with lifelong quadriplegia.

The city-side gangsters were both livid and remorseful in equal measure. The talkative acquaintance whom I had met at the hospital was full of wise counsel for himself and the others. In his view, living in uncertain times in a society awash with weapons, survival was an uncertain possibility. It was dangerous to depend on brushes of luck as negative reinforcement for life. It was better to live incognito within a closeted comfort zone till the times changed.

Given his fighting spirit, M survived, albeit relegated to remain bedridden for the rest of his life. The word on the street gave an insight into the build-up to his tragedy. Close on the heels of his frenzied campaign after the first shooting attempt, the police had carried out a search operation after having been tipped off about the presence of foreign insurgent fighters in the locality. The search came up with nothing. But as he had been warned, many tongues wagged, squarely blaming M for the operation that had imperilled the lives of the foreign militants. The imaginative ones even contrived stories as to how M had persuaded the local anti-terrorist police

wing to carry out the operation in an attempt to intimidate his detractors. Within days of this operation, M's fatal shooting occurred.

IV

In 2004 I braced myself to finally leave the Vale, but not before witnessing a full-fledged stealthy turf war in the separatist political arena. Assassins' bullets claimed the lives of the many associates, as well as relatives of some of the most prominent politicians. It was then that I fully realized the calculated cruelties and wanton killings had become a sign of the times in our Vale. The killings and injuries seemed so routine and so expected that people talked about them in a blasé manner, even though they were thoroughly wrecked in spirit by them. I left the Vale and realized that I was perhaps suffering from symptomatic post-traumatic stress disorder on reaching the normative social environs of London. The rest of the family joined me too, having long harboured a burning desire, tried recreating our home environs anew in West Yorkshire, something the violence had denied or snatched away from us.

I didn't hear of M again till several years later. I returned to Kashmir in the fall of 2008, after a harrowing time trying to recover from the death of a loved one, which saw me spending a reclusive year researching genetics at the Christian Medical College Hospital in Vellore.

I has spent the intervening years worlds away from the smells and sights of death and violence. Even as I prepared myself to attend a cousin's mistimed wedding, my G-Shock watch, which M's flunky had coveted more than a decade ago, fell apart, the dial, strap, everything. In an instant, M's face and our tête-à-tête at the college canteen came rushing back into my minds eye. At the wedding, I bumped into a second cousin who ran a shop in close vicinity to M's and asked him of the latter's whereabouts. My cousin informed me of M's passing away a few months prior after suffering from septic complications.

In the following days as the Valley geared up for local elections, I ran into the talkative former city-side gang member who wanted to discuss his wife's recurrent health problems. As I sifted through her reports, I asked him about M. This friend spoke in a regretful but sharp tone; in his view, M, confined to his bed, had died a broken and depressed man who had resorted to substance abuse, trying to alleviate the sense of helplessness and despair

that had accreted increasingly in his later years. Given his zest for life, it didn't surprise him that M felt so frustrated by his condition that he had confided to his many mates that surviving an assassination attempt to live in a dependant state had been an option worse than death.

In the end, M's name along with his football trophies survived him. His friends and acquaintances portrayed him as a profligate spender who doted on his friends; others remembered his volatile and masochistic streaks that hastened his violent end. But almost all of them filled up the background with descriptions of his inventory of flashy gear and cars through snippets of shared memories.

With a touch of sarcastic realism, the yakking gangster fondly reminisced about the pre-1989 days when murders were a rarity and disputes never went out of control. But these were changed times marked by the viciousness of deceitful people and guns that held no respect or place for old-school gangsters. He observed that seeking to lead one's life on one's own terms in war-torn environs was akin to being a skier trudging all the way up a mountain to explore classic ski lines only to end up on the treacherous slopes of an avalanche zone.

I couldn't but agree.

Girl: Suborned

‘Life is a sum of all your choices.’

ALBERT CAMUS

ONE WARM AFTERNOON in the first week of May 2007, I stood in the foreground of Glenfield Hospital in Leicester attending the televised wake for Madeleine Beth McCann. This unfortunate four-year-old had disappeared without a trace from her family’s holiday home in the Praia da Luz resort in Portugal a day before. Incidentally the preceding Friday, as an observer, I had been seconded to Dr Gerry McCann, the cardiology consultant on call that day who was also Madeleine’s father. As the hospital director made his show of support speech and nurses wept, my mind hovered over the tragedies that befall even simple people with normal life circles.

Over the next few weeks the disappearance and abduction acquired a tempo rivalling that of Lady Diana’s death by accident.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, with a rapidly burgeoning populace, Srinagar city sprang suburbs for not only the affluent but also for the many not so affluent or marginally subsisting denizens. Drawn by the lower land prices, many lower middle-class colonies sprang up on the city edges, and the housing boom transformed the paddy and potato fields on the city’s outskirts into new neighbourhoods giving rise to ‘ruburbs’. The term appeared in *TIME* magazine, denoting areas where a rural way of life coexisted despite urban migration.

It was in one of these ruburbs that a friend of mine relocated from downtown and increasingly voiced his frustration with his poverty-ridden circumstances. Two of his elder brothers had foregone schooling to help provide for the family. After their father died, their efforts as shawl artisans

not only saw them marrying off their two sisters but also afforded enough succour to the mother who shielded their youngest sibling enough so that he could continue his education to university level.

The start of the insurgency in 1990 heralded its own exigencies for the most socioeconomically vulnerable sections of the populace and left many of the less resourceful families in want. Given the high recruitment into the insurgent ranks from this particular locality, the atmosphere was very uncertain and the prospect of getting stranded in a cordon and search operation or a firefight wasn't very alluring. In a bid to overcome his increasing frustration, borne of both the poverty and perpetual shadow of violence, this friend of mine chose to supplement the family income and agreed to tutor a few high-school teenagers from the neighbourhood.

Among the motley group of students who attended his tutorials was a thinly built teenage girl with finely delicate, if not beautiful, features. A conventional-looking girl with brushed and braided schoolgirl hair held back by hairpins. I bumped into this girl many a time, as she lived in the same lane as my friend.

She, of very meagre means, belonged to a family of social pariahs. Her sickly and asocial father was a low-paid artisan. Her younger sibling, a tender sixth-form shabby schoolboy, always spoke in a tremulous tone, betraying an overly diffident disposition. The family inhabited a two-room mud-brick house and lived in very meagre circumstances. The story went that her family had been forcibly evicted from their previous old-city home, in accordance with the unwritten social rule governing anyone facing allegations of moral turpitude, which in this case had been cast on her mother, who did appear to be a very assertive individual. What roundly surprised me was that the mother's slatternly appearance betrayed a lack of the physical attributes and coquettish behaviour that one would usually associate with a hooker. It was also hard not to notice the constant stream of gruff men entering and exiting the schoolgirl's home, conversing with the mother or ogling the girl.

I

Le Ly Hayslip's poignant memoir *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) details her life's turns; from a peasant girl born and brought up in the small central Vietnamese village of Ky La to her travails in the aftermath of

the American intervention in her country, which upended her world and her family's fortunes.

Her firsthand account luridly illustrates the many horrors that the conflict exacted on the psycho-social domains in Vietnam. As an adolescent, her life fast forwarded and pathologized, forcing her to endure everything—displacement, imprisonment, rape, loss of family members and sexual exploitation—that came her way because of the social meltdown catalysed by the conflict.

The film version, directed by Oliver Stone, traces her life's trajectory from a simple peasant girl to an unwed teen mother who, forced by her circumstances, made ends meet by moonlighting as a prostitute. Immigrating to the United States in 1970 at the tender age of twenty after marrying an American soldier, her unfortunate circumstances returned in the form of constrained finances and an abusive husband. The husband, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, loathed her zest for independent life and economic betterment. The resulting estrangement led him to commit suicide. The film then vividly covers her return home after many years to meet the family she had left behind in Vietnam, and who had had their own share of tragedies to bear.

II

In the autumn of that year, the seasonal chill went down to my bones as I ventured out to visit my friend. This time, I ran into the girl on the main street itself. She was cowering and trembling in fear, trying to fend off the repeated slaps and kicks being rained on her by a much older and expansive man with a gruff-looking face. He grimaced menacingly at the people who stopped to watch, pushing the cringing young woman towards the house.

Given the situation, which put the onus on you to finish your catching up and tête-à-têtes fast and head home, my friend insisted that I stay the night rather than risk getting caught in an ambush or arbitrary detention. I told my friend about the incident I had witnessed on the main road. The man, he told me, was her husband, one of the many blokes who operated in the grey zones of the racketeer-insurgent nexus and who had been a frequent visitor to her home. A few months ago, the girl had been married off in a hurry in a very hush-hush ceremony and ever since then, this barely out of her teens girl would be seen bruised and battered, the victim of the ill

temper of her brute of a husband, who had moved in permanently with her family.

I stayed the night at my friend's house and the next morning boarded the local minibus for college. The girl too boarded. I saw her up close; she appeared emaciated with scratch marks on her cheeks and all the signs I would associate with a limp soul. Her melisma-ridden face, emaciated body and bulging tummy made me realize that she was pregnant. Her condition provoked the maternal instincts of the elderly women passengers enough to not only hold her hand but also berate the other crowding passengers to make way for her, so she could sit comfortably.

On that short ride in an overcrowded bus, I wondered about her prayers to an omniscient God and her seemingly omnipresent perdition. Her face seemed a telling example of the hell that constant physical and psychological abuse can turn anyone's life into. How did she live with him, I thought, the guilt of being helpless to change her condition, the lack of faith in her own self that would have let her disgorge her fears and live a life predicated not by fear of loss. I wondered of the dreams she harboured for her unborn, a prayer maybe. That he be bestowed a better chance of life than the one looming large.

III

Her child had been destined to be both displaced and left fatherless on his arrival into the world. Weeks before she was to go into labour, waiting assassins cut down her tormenting husband and his Man Friday in a fusillade of AK-47 bullets in one of the ruburban back alleys. Subsequently, the girl and her family were warned to vacate their house or risk ending up dead.

In the fresh flush of motivated insurgency taking hold, this older militant cohort who had seen a lot of recycling over the years between arrests by the paramilitary agencies and back to underground was widely seen to be suspect, compromised and unreliable. The new lot of insurgents, eager to protect not only their turf but also their foreign militants cadre, resorted to target killings of the older generation of strayed militants—in other words, fighters with guns who were more engrossed in self-enrichment and living off others, occupying a venal grey zone in the eyes of the motivated and increasingly radical insurgent lot.

My own extended family skirted close to the scenes of some of the gruesome assassinations carried out in this phase. At my aunt's house, a festive wedding reception hosted by the neighbours turned deadly when in broad daylight one of the groom's friends was shot dead in cold blood in the courtyard even as he posed for photographs. A cousin of my father, while selling merchandise at his shop, witnessed a neighbour's twenty-something son, standing just a few feet away, getting his brains blown out by a hood wearing passer-by, who disappeared into a side street within seconds. Both dead men had been active militants in the past.

Given this scenario, the girl and her family disappeared from the scene. In time, the insurgency was contained enough in the urban areas for the padlocked door of the girl's home to be opened by the winter of 1998–99. Though the atmosphere reminded me of El Salvador in the 1980s, this particularly marked family with its limited means felt safe enough to return home.

The trajectory of her life at that juncture was recounted to me by a local chemist. Younger than me, this redneck ran a lucrative practice and knew the intimate goings on in the area. I had come across him before and his overnight rags-to-riches story was a prime example of the times, when a change of fortunes was effected in warzones by a mix of lawlessness, criminality and debauchery.

This chemist came from a large family of poor urbanites and had learnt the tools of the chemist trade after dropping out of school. With a small capital he had set up his own shop and undercut his mentor's business. The anarchy that had relegated many of the wealthy families to lowered economic and social stature, and his contacts with the burgeoning mafia that was operating in the grey zone under the patronage of both insurgents and counter-insurgents, were instrumental in seeing his fortunes surge.

In those days, repeated heists plagued the city. Among the varied targets were big pharmacies and businesses whose stocks were cleaned out overnight. This stolen merchandise made its way to small-time operators like this chemist, who bought the goods at a pittance and in turn sold them at their normal price, making a killing. His other income came from acting as a tout, arranging illegal abortions for women at a steep price. He used his contacts with the lower staff of various hospitals, who carried out the procedures in dingy backrooms.

It was cricket season, with India playing South Africa. I ran into the girl again. With a toddler hugging her hip, she was embroiled in a vicious catfight with another woman on the main street. The latter, I noticed, sported a mocking look on her face. The veins in the young widow's thin pallid neck appeared prominent as tortuous green lines, even as she shouted herself hoarse with all the invectives and abuse she could muster.

As usual, it felt imperative to walk on. The war had taught me to be more tolerant of the viciousness, cruelties, pretences and hypocrisies that people indulged in. Perhaps that was the reason why I preferred to move on without batting an eyelid, unmindful of the scuffle. The druggist, watching the scene from his shopfront, waved at me. He shook his head in disgust and then gave a mischievous wink as we shook hands amidst the din of the shouting, which was getting louder. Adopting a bold and execratory tone he went forth and branded both warring women as sluts before he divulged an interesting angle to it all. The other girl, a much-divorced woman, had acquired her 'naughty' reputation in her teens, he remarked with a crooked grin on his face. A few years ago, her cultivated and somewhat calculated perpetual aura of intimacy had led her to endure an abortion as a consequence of what she termed rape at the hands of a militant who was hiding out in her home. However, many surmised that the sex was consensual. This apparently forced her parents to marry her off.

But her obstinate refusal to give up her lifestyle saw her divorced twice over. The druggist added that both women had endured abortions recently, which, he informed me with a prideful glint in his face, he had arranged in the local hospital through his clandestine contacts. I took the story with a pinch of salt. My own stints in hospital had perhaps benumbed me enough to attenuate any reaction, but his next remark was meant to be the rattling coup de grâce; both women were fraternizing with the same man, a policeman, and a non-Muslim at that. Though a scandalous affair, the sleaze went unnoticed until the unwanted pregnancy crisis blew the flimsy cover draped over it. And now both women were fighting out in the open to press their claim on their shared paramour.

I realized then and there that times had changed for our society. The days when the morals of the people were kept on a tight leash by an amalgam of strict elders, social diktats and the shame of tradition were over. Unlike in the days of yore, the entry of guns had made it difficult for tradition and elders to assert themselves. I walked home in the dusk,

thinking how many other such stories were no doubt sprouting, beginning and ending at that particular juncture of time.

In 2006, many years later, ensconced worlds away in the UK, I checked the newspapers from back home. The headlines were awash with reports on a sex scandal that had come out in the open when a porn DVD featuring a teenage girl had made its way into the hands of a young police officer in Srinagar. The subsequent investigation had created a storm and claimed the reputations of the who's who of the political, bureaucratic and security apparatus. Mobs had vandalized the brothel-keeper madam's three-storey house in the old city. The platitudinous 'we are probing and the investigation is still on' lines of the government spokesman were duly reported in the papers as well. The ensuing probe and the trial to determine culpability in what legally constituted the statutory rape of scores of underage girls went on for years without any impressive outcome.

IV

On a balmy summer Sunday in 2007, while on a visit to Srinagar, I was invited for lunch to my previously poverty stricken friend's place. He had married by then and after much struggle had managed to secure a steady government job. As we walked to his house, I realized that new and burgeoning constructions had changed the face of the locality. At the mouth of the lane in which stood my friend's house, I saw that in place of the girl's hovel stood a two-storey cement-brick house enclosed within a solid brick wall. Two shops had also come up in the front. I also spotted a car in the driveway, a sure sign of affluence.

I asked my friend if the property had changed hands; he replied in the negative, adding that the unfortunate girl, the young widow as I knew her, and her family still lived there. She had braved her miseries and her promiscuous proclivities had helped her overcome her economic woes such that she was able to rejoin college. Through her many and eclectic contacts, she had landed a well-paying permanent job in one of the many government departments. Her affluence was very visible, he said, and there had been no looking back for her since. Ever the decent non-judgemental sort, he was happy for her change in circumstances, which he felt was well-deserved given the hardship and deprivation she had endured in another life.

As chance would have it, the girl, now a woman, came out of her big wrought-iron gate; she was much older, with apt maquillage and wearing a decent dress. She walked with a confident gait, ignoring our presence with a sardonic smile on her face. I surmised that the schoolgirl had come full circle, and walked on to my friend's home.

Reading Hayslip's memoir many years ago, I couldn't help but think of the book as an synecdoche illustration of the much bigger but neglected destructive social changes that prolonged conflicts, especially insurgencies, foster. But even then there will always be self-questioning, whether we are able to contend with the maze of blurred frontlines and fluid political dynamics, invested status quos and vested interests that handicaps us in our proper understanding of the bigger tragedy beyond the headlines; I needed an answer to these queries, I knew.

Redemption Stone

Now the wren has gone to roost and the sky is turnin' gold/And like the sky my soul is also turnin'/Turnin' from the past, at last and all I've left behind.

RAY LAMONTAGNE AND THE PARIAH DOGS, 'Old Before Your Time', *God Willin' & the Creek Don't Rise* (2010)

AFTER THE WAR erupted, 'Mac', the former head of the city-side boys' gang, was no longer the Mac people knew before the conflict. He appeared preternaturally calm, a much watered-down version of his previous avatar. It was the autumn of 1998, we were engaged in a conversation outside his shop, he was trying hard to provide me solace, knowing of my mother's passing away after prolonged illness. My dazed state couldn't make much sense of what he was talking about. Everything appeared banal and platitudinous. Even as he put both of his arms on my shoulders to show he understood what I was going through. An acquaintance trembling with fear appeared out of the blue approached him. An army raiding team in another area of the city-side had picked up one of our other friends. They had let off this chap but and battered the other guy senseless. I watched the sense of trepidation in Mac's demeanour. He passed his shop's keys to his cousin and told me to scoot. 'You've served your time; why do you worry?' I asked. 'Because everyone has a break point, and so does our friend. In the torture dungeons once you cross that threshold there are very few people you will not name—whether innocent or not innocent—to get out of that hellish state they've put you through.'

I

Back in the 1980s Mac was a name to contend with. Tall and wiry, he had been a known Srinagar student gangster, whose silent daunting presence,

sharp mind and reserve had made it difficult to be in his proximity unless one had cut one's teeth and proven one's mettle by enduring vicious fistfights. His presence on the street pre-1989 always meant trouble and violence.

In 2008 I returned home for a visit, and one fine day visited Mac. Unmindful of the noisy ear-wrenching traffic around, we exchanged pleasantries and reminisced about all the momentous fights he had been in and I had witnessed, and my own hilarious scuffles and narrow escapes from unwanted trouble, sometimes thanks to him; the black eyes and the laughs we had accrued from playing practical jokes; the riffs and scrimmages. We both realized that 1989, the year before the war, had been our last happy one. At the end of 1989, he had disappeared from the scene at the very beginning of the troubles in the Vale to train in arms and become an insurgent. Arrested within months of returning, he had spent many years in prison. Conversing at that shopfront, it felt as if we were both shedding our accreted burdens and exorcising our ghosts.

He always had this very astute worldly overview of things and many a times I had sought his advice on personal matters. Even as we talked I couldn't but help veer the discussion towards the 2006 sex scandal where scores of politicians, police officers and paramilitary bigwigs were accused and arrested for patronizing a big prostitution racket in the city as mentioned in the earlier chapter.

War, he declaimed, had its own dynamics and dimensions, and every region of the world housed vulnerable populations already politically disenfranchised and socioeconomically powerless, which rendered them readymade victims meant and destined for exploitation. Thus we come across the cycle of exploitation, redemption and and of course, war entrepreneurship, including the oldest profession in the world—prostitution.

'What about the costs incurred? To ourselves and our society?' I asked.

'Every churning, every human process incurs its costs on us!' Mac replied stoically as he thought back to his own sojourn as a prisoner. A good three years of his life in its prime had been lost in some of the most notorious dungeons that the state had to offer in those early war years. 'That triumphant applause that bid you farewell as you left this place to train in arms was nowhere when we came out. I was so enthusiastic about picking up a gun and fighting for a cause. So much so that a couple of us guys tracked down a top-notch LoC route guide within minutes of his arrival in

Srinagar and forced him to arrange our trip. When I did cross the LoC to train, I was perceptive enough to keep alive in my mind my apprehensions of meeting a violent death on some forgotten barricade. I never froze my lingering doubts that this could be a one-way street; if you carry a rifle in your hand to shoot and kill pitilessly, you might as well be well-prepared to expect nothing less. But,' he paused and then spoke in an unhurried and painful tone, 'nobody had trained, primed or acclimatized any of us, me included, on how to endure violent torture on arrest.'

He was among the first batch of detainees, and their captors didn't have a measure of, or a manual regarding how to effectively 'deal' with them except wrathfully. Manacled and unshaven, they walked around with naked torsos in floppy drawstring pyjamas without the requisite strings to prevent them falling down.

'But this pioneer detainee stuff came with perks too,' he smiled ironically. 'Military planes transported us to jails outside. You know they talk of Gitmo Bay [Guantanamo Bay]. We suffered that years before.'

He paused and unhurriedly sipped from the tea tumbler firmly cupped in his right hand. 'Our bodies are innately conditioned to proffer and receive intimacy naturally in the form of affection from our loved ones, spouses and partners. Though I had very few peers when I slashed and roughed up people, it was in those interrogation chambers that I realized that violence done unto others is another form of physical intimacy, a negative one, and a perversely unnatural one at that.'

These demeaning aspects of their incarceration included being blindfolded and shackled, and enduring beatings, electrocution with dynamos, waterboarding, slashing and solitary confinement. And in the trucks that transported them, armed paramilitaries pinched them hard, leaving their skin abraded and bleeding. Even as they arrived, stunned and shaky at the interrogation centre, they were subjected to en masse beatings with military-issue belts, clubs and chains. He would bleed profusely, like the others, but the beatings didn't cease. He would wake up in an airless, cramped cell with twenty-eight other detainees after having passed out. Enduring this negative intimacy in those darkened chambers, he felt his own sense of self deeply profaned; many a times the humiliation and pain so overwhelmed him that he wished for some death wish of his to come true. The violence dealt unhinged his self to a level where malevolent uncertainty overwhelms every measure of known human emotion.

‘My sense of my self, my future and my past had vanished into some inchoate irrational entity during those harrowing days. The memories of anything pleasant had muted themselves. Every day we wished the clouds would bring rain; a torrent meant cancellation of the daily beatings we had to endure on the asphalt path outside our cells.’

The food was bad and there were no toilet facilities. They complained to the officer in charge. His reply left them stunned.

‘I need your breaths. Enough to just keep you alive.’

‘The officer’s arrogance, gained through a sense of power over others, made me acutely aware that our helpless circumstances would find no respite,’ Mac continued, his pallid gaze drifting away into the evening twilight as he recollected the nightmare of days past. ‘I looked at my face in the mirror one day and came across a stranger with a woebegone, defeated visage. I spent that day moaning aloud the thought that I had thoroughly crashed; that my life was a train wreck. Anyway, it was only later, after we were shifted to a proper jail, that I realized how the mind and body heals itself, slowly but surely. In the end I re-emerged. Life has to go on, and life will go on. The sense of disquieting power that my gangster past gave me surprised me and helped turn my mind away from regret. The enduring memory of my past morphed into a renewal of my envenomed optimism, and a search for something to redeem my limp soul and psyche. My gangster past served me well; I healed, regained my verve and lorded over the jail in time!’ He spoke philosophically, his tenor turning pleasant.

For Mac, the collective travails of the detainees could be summed up as some elliptical journeys where people shared similar abrasive beginnings but different outcomes. Many others didn’t fare so well, developing a caustic and embittered view that would blight the rest of their lives. Mac’s prison stint had ingrained in him a certain pitiless perceptiveness that enabled him to see things as they were; I could discern the pity he felt for co-sojourners who repetitively rendered their accounts of imprisonment garnishing them with banal soliloquys with an intent to create an aura of being a somebody—a living celebrity martyr—around themselves.

‘A defiant streak zapped into our amputated souls. I did stuff that I would never have envisaged in my earlier days as a prisoner.’

‘Like?’

‘Like, some reset of my mental attitude. To obviate being turned into a doormat in the ideologically charged atmosphere, I had to think and act like

a gangster: Beating up fellow prisoners; bones were broken and some noses needed to be bloodied.'

'Fights?'

'You know, there were relentless clashes amongst us in the jail. The jail staff and guards were only too happy to see the prisoners bludgeon each other and never intervened. The moment a new prisoner entered the jail, he would converge with others on the basis of where he belonged. As usual the village boys hated the urban lads, who they thought were snippy smartasses inhabiting a world of their own where the former's existence, voices and views were irrelevant. Within the urban prisoners you had the upper city boys who had no love lost for the downtowners and vice versa. The insular downtowners, much like the villagers, had these old boys, people obsessed with politics and their place in the story. Without the requisite abilities to hold themselves above the others, these pea-brains could only muster hackneyed ways to satiate their innate urges to be somebody's. A discerning eye like mine saw nothing innovative or impressive in these indulgent imitative fantasies of the adolescent variety. Ironically, in environs where humanity itself is debased, I could see these wannabe leaders, whose concept of life was garnishing events to make up for an hurriedly unlived hagiography, suffer from this superlative soldier syndrome, peddled willingly by their lackeys. I found myself squared against them, unwittingly drawn into an intramural conflict.

'So there I am one day, bathing at the well in the prison courtyard. The peasants had again clashed with the downtowners after a dyslexic exchange over the issue of Kashmir's independence versus accession to Pakistan, in the process belting the downtown "leader". An overly verbose old-city lad —from the Safa Kadal area—physically intervened only to have the peasants vent their ire on him. Bruised and battered in the scrimmage, he fled, only to be chased by a large posse of rural lads bent on mauling him. I don't know whether it was reflex or a fellow feeling for the downtowner that saw me grab my metal bucket and smash the face of one of his pursuers. As blood spurted from his nostrils, the hunters let go of their quarry and retreated. The abashed downtown lad held up his arm and I helped him get up from the floor. I remember noticing the mutilated, scarred area on his right arm, a memento from an injury inflicted by a retaliatory bullet burst in an ambush on the paramilitary patrol gone wrong.

I realized none of us were according any respect to each other's shed blood and scars.'

I knew the person Mac was talking about. That chap had picked up his life with much difficulty after his release and then prospered as an entrepreneur, on the way acquiring a reputation for resourcefulness.

'We became good friends and walked out of jail a few days apart after serving our sentences. He invited me for his wedding but forgot to call the rest of the up city jailmates. So we crashed his wedding; all the others he had forgotten to invite walked into the reception alongside me,' Mac continued with a grin.

'Something like jailhouse camaraderie!'

'We took lots of pictures at the wedding, like some class reunion thing. Our celebratory ardour betraying not even a whiff of the harrowing open-eyed nightmare we had endured. It was like returning to this world, with its happiness and its imperfections.'

We both laughed.

'The girl's story still puzzles me; how a girl singlehandedly seeks to change the circumstances of her life, in a fairly conservative society,' I said to Mac, rendering my take on her life and circumstances, no matter what the cost, ending it with 'and I wonder how many other stories are around.'

'Everyone heals in time and picks up their lives, whoever they are, with hearts of gold and souls of a whore or vice versa. One never knows how redemption occurs or marks its presence beyond our wishes.' Mac smacked his lips as he closed his shop.

'We came out of prison in ones and twos. The world had changed, there were filthy things going on and society seemed to be floundering. A new moocher-mafiosi class had emerged running extortion rackets, raking in weekly, monthly shakedown payments from every damn shop, household and business around, as well as cuts from land deals and carjacking. These stealers were getting rich, making their first generation fortunes on money extracted through fear. I saw it all. Many of these moochers also became politicos or their claques, many making speeches on sacrifice and the posterity of martyrs, their verbiage inflicted on us through avidly mindless publicity. The social norms that had guided the denizens in the past had been so attenuated that none publicly condemned the culpability of these predators whose past acts were smudging the names of those fighting and

the posterity of those killed nursing an inveterate political sentiment. It was tragically ironic.

'Politics for these sorts is like a carwash! Where you do whatever you like and then join politics to wash out all the grime and dirt on your hands and get a measure of respectability.

'Then I was approached to join the political scene. Politics here entailed allowing encroachment of privacy and personal space for something as ephemeral as fame, press coverage and cable TV or unearned money. And if I ventured in, for some confused reason or the other, politics would have demanded a price; those twinges of conscience and regret would weigh too heavily on my heart. I didn't need that. I somehow knew I would be only too happy running around mountain streams with a fishing tackle.'

In jail, almost everyone felt lucky to emerge alive. Once out, Mac stepped into a pell-mell phase of life with traits of self-abuse and self-pity making their way to the fore.

'I felt so sorry for myself, I got sloshed on a picnic.' It was during those risky days when the war had left everything desiccated, even the picnic spots. He had always loved horse riding. So there he was, slam drunk and riding a pony in Gulmarg's desuetude afflicted meadows. 'Only this time the pony went berserk at my drunken handling and the poor animal galloped down the steep inclines. So there I was, hurtling down a pine slope with the pony owner nowhere in sight. And then the animal sent me sprawling. I woke up after a while and found myself facing an old shrine. I dusted myself off and went in, cried my heart out and vowed never to hit the bottle again.'

The famous shrine in the hills, dedicated to Baba Reshi, is a place where childless couples usually go to pay obeisance and ask for a child. My friend Mac had in his words been reborn that day, the thought of some ethereal mystical spirit watching over him.

'I wasn't the only one whose fate had been blighted. I was just a fragment of the price the vast upheaval was extracting on us, our people.'

'So that was your sense of closure?' I asked.

'Of course not. That came much later.'

A couple of years later, Mac spotted the arrogant police officer who had been the lord and master of the torture chambers. He had been promoted and posted as a district-level head (SSP) of police in the Kashmir Vale. Out on a shopping stint, the police officer had unwittingly ventured into Mac's

area. Having completed his purchases, the officer had just closed the door after getting into his plush new jeep when a rock smashed the windshield, nearly hitting him.

'His driver bore the brunt of it. You should have seen the stunned helplessness on the officer's face. He could do nothing except use his ceremonial baton to break the remnants of the windshield, take to the wheel and scoot away,' Mac remarked with vengeful glee. 'That thing! A rock in my hand led me to render an exchange and reverse the helplessness that I had experienced under his watch. This wasn't just revenge on my terms but also my closure.'

Epilogue

I got Mac's cue, that war is but an etchant, which seeps into a society and its psyche, undermining our trust in personal and familial bonds, distorting and transforming lives at a very high and corrosive cost, in the process.

My questions remained after so many years, as I reset my own location in my mind's eye that night after meeting Mac, remembering the girl in my friend's locality. She had picked up her life, at a cost though. Would these equations exist or these challenges have been endured but for the war? Then my thoughts hovered over Mac's journey and I wondered whether war is actually a catalyst for human evolution, for good or for bad?

Conflict, I suppose, is a transformative trigger that tears up time-tested checks and balances on prevalent social mores, economic and psychological equations. But even in the midst of those crises we humans can find a personal sense of redemption whether it be cold renouncement, or passionate re-engagement with what we believe in. To get there we freeze our doubts, redefine our notions of honour, pride and rectitude and if we can't, we find refuge in the desolate convincingness of our own version of events and in the process limit our relevant evolutionary spheres. New dynamics emerge that provide a spur to both humanity's basest as well as most evolved natures. Our unconditioned minds perpetually struggle to contend with the new conflict-induced interfaces, spurring a fluid and inchoate blending—of high character, noblesse oblige, sacrifices, as well as venality, betrayal and selfishness—like bacteriophages borne of our own individual traits and proclivities, which in time carve their own spaces to dominate our psyches and mark a new beginning.

Reveille, 1950–1989

Aziz's Plaid Suit

The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.

ALICE WALKER

BORIS PASTERNAK'S *Doctor Zhivago*, set in the time of the 1917 Bolshevik takeover of Russia, isn't just a tragic tale of unrequited love but a social statement about the crests and troughs lives undergo during conflict and a change of system. As José Saramago eloquently pointed out in his Nobel acceptance speech, time makes and remakes us, within our societal and political upheavals. A time of conflict especially radically alters our perception and our latitude of action, inducing a churning that throws up new interfaces, which seem very alien and very familiar at the same time. The human cost incurred, though, gets relegated with its stories to words, which continue to exist within us or many a times haunt us.

I

My late father grew up in the 1950s and came of age in the '60s. Like his parents, he too had witnessed many apoplectic upheavals around him. These political and social changes would inform much of the situation the Vale finds itself in today. He often spoke of the grinding poverty of the 1950s and the fear that marked the lives of ordinary citizens back then. Though fairly insulated from the vicissitudes that many of his contemporaries and acquaintances—bereft of the protective canopy that societal status proffered him—had to go through, the deprivation and pinched adolescence did leave him both vicariously disconcerted and

distressed at times. Many of these incidents were still etched into his memory decades after they occurred.

One of the many colourful characters he mentioned was a neighbour of ours, named Aziz Nage. Much older than my father, Aziz Nage was an artisan by profession and in my dad's opinion, street-smart. I remember Aziz as a greying man with a toothbrush moustache, endowed with a remarkable penchant for wisecracks and self-mockery. One would often run into him as he carried a small wicker basket, performing his quotidian routine of carrying home bread for his large family, which he had sired quite late in his life. But in the days of yore, at a younger age, his artisanal skills offered one a degree of self-sufficiency and loe expenses of being single proffered dreamy plebeians like Aziz Nage, a chance to indulge themselves and enjoy a simulacrum of a desired life, which helped alleviate the drudgery of existence.

According to my father, Aziz loved films and good clothes, and every Friday would make the long trek city-side to watch his favourite 'talkies'. He was a big fan of the actress Madhubala, with whom he had fallen in love very early on in his life, instantly and madly. His redemptive dreams, which he often talked of at the shopfronts, always included the late actress as a redeeming angel and companion.

After watching a film, he would spend the rest of the week describing its plot and nuances to curious acquaintances and friends in an episodic manner, depending on his mood and state of mind. The curiosity of this latter group put him on a pedestal, and their relentless petitioning would make him thaw and agree to their requests, that he accompany them all the way to the city-side and show them around the theatres so that they too could savour cinematic delights. True to his temperament, the journey would only be completed in stages, over a week, culminating on the next Friday.

II

It was a time of change and violence too, and Aziz would become its unwitting victim, left with such scars that he would cease to be his former self. It was the mid-1950s. The twenty-something Aziz had, over a period of many months, put aside enough money to fulfil a long-cherished desire —to purchase a custom-made three-piece plaid suit, complete with a

fountain pen adorning his left breast pocket. On that fateful Friday—having taken the delivery of his suit a few days before—he wore his plaid coat and trousers on his weekly sojourn to the cinema. On his return, as he reached his own side of the Safa Kadal bridge, calamity struck. The Peace Brigade* posse was there, and as they stared at Aziz, he was befuddled by their curious looks measuring him up. He would discover later, much to his chagrin, that donning a coat and trousers of a design and fabric similar to those worn by their pack leader—a sibling of and patron to the state's ruler at that time Bakshi Ghulam Muhammad—was a cardinal sin for which he paid dearly by undertaking a forced trip through their version of purgatory.

My father was returning from school and witnessed Aziz's merciless thrashing by the Peace Brigade members that day. The leader summoned Aziz and struck the first profusion of blows, following them up with a kanger strike that covered Aziz in soot and burning coal. The followers of the Trujillonian character not only beat the living daylights out of Aziz but also tore his much adored and vaunted dress to tatters, leaving Aziz as naked as a newborn. My father also noticed that many of the unctuous camp followers of the vicious pack were hovering nearby, and fervently massaged the posse leader's hands to alleviate any discomfort he might have endured while beating up Aziz. It is said that the dazed and injured Aziz walked the last furlong home with his hands covering his face and his genitals, and I guess his shame.

Aziz Nage never recovered his former verve. He turned recluse for many weeks before he came out, chastened enough to perhaps never even harbour the dream of turning into a dandy again. For the rest of his life, Aziz would stick to his proletarian origins and sartorial sense.

The other person my father talked about was Nabir Pasayla, a tough tongawalla whose temperamental nature and tough physique saw him becoming a much-feared street fighter. As a vocation, Nabir absolutely loved being a charioteer. His tonga was bedecked with finery, and his white mare's footfall and speed was legendary. He would pick fights for no reason and in time created a name for himself. Many younger and less tough acquaintances would pick fights knowing that Nabir had their back.

Everything was hunky dory till some time in the early 1960s when he had a run-in with the Peace Brigade. Unlike Aziz, he retaliated, as was his nature, beating his attackers black and blue. But this time he had gone too far. The worst affected by his hands was no foot soldier of the Brigade but a

relative of the ruler. Abandoning both his tonga and family, Nabir went underground and then to Jammu, turning up months later—as my father remarked with a chuckle—as a sepoy of the auxiliary police force, complete with a khaki uniform and a gun in hand, on the eve of the Indo-China war of 1962.

Nabir was lucky, but many others weren't. The deliverance from these marauders came and it came through a kanger lobbed in anger that proved to be the much-longed and prayed for comeuppance of the Peace Brigades. The 1963 Moe-e-Muqaddas agitation was in full swing and a group of protesters was accosted by Bakshi Rashid, the nephew of the Peace Brigade patron. Drunk on power that he felt his family had over the Valleyites, he stopped his jeep in the city centre to hurl the choicest expletives and invectives at the protestors. The protestors, having chafed under the excesses of the Brigade for a long time, listened sullenly. Until out of the blue, one of the protestors—perhaps at the end of his tether—hurled a kanger at the abuser and then all hell broke loose. A riot ensued, in which the brigade members were manhandled all over the Vale's towns enmasse and the properties belonging to their patrons, the Bakshi Family, including a cinema in the city centre was torched by incensed mobs. Within a few days the mobs had effectively put an end to the depredations of this Peace Brigade.

These depredations would be reprised in a more deadly and malignant manner by the counter-insurgents three decades later, spawning even more horrifying stories than Aziz Nage's violent metamorphosis.

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* A gang of sadistic toughs recruited locally, under the employ and protection of the Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad government of 1953–62, whose job entailed browbeating the antagonistic population of the Vale into submission by violence, both physical and sexual.

The Butcher's Wife

...she must reverence that within in her which struggles for expression.

MARGARET SANGER, 'A Parents' Problem or Woman's?'
The Birth Review (1919)

MY OWN ENDURING memory of her is from when I was a preteen, watching her, an ageing, traditionally attired grey-haired woman, as she, on a summer day, publicly manhandled a neighbourhood bully who had had the temerity to push and hurt her grandson while playing cricket on the Safa Kadal streets. She not only punched and slapped the tall bully, she also proceeded to spit on him while hurling invectives.

Noorie Massi had already greyed by the time I was old enough to remember and appreciate faces. But to everyone, my generation included, she was a tough, feisty and indefatigable old woman. Boys, a generation senior to us, spoke of the times in the mid-1970s when she would barge into the local government-run Ali Beigh School and cajole the teachers to release the whole class so that they could tend her recently purchased flock of sheep in the vegetable field adjacent to the school. The teachers would unfailingly oblige.

A neighbour of my father's, she was an anachronism of sorts in many ways: a refined woman from a waza (traditional chef) family who married into a butcher household of some means. Though widowed in her middle age, she came close to being what Arab societies term or define as ukht-ul-rijaal, sister of men—she was indomitable and industrious, well-versed in a man's world and tough in a way intimidating to an overly traditional patriarchal set-up. Widowhood combined with poverty of means would have left any other woman of her time a work-worn nervous wreck, but not her. She was a slugger. Although unlettered herself, she insisted on

educating her children, including her daughters—even if it meant taking up cudgels with her spouse or accompanying them to their schools. For many, including me, she embodied the venerated neighbourhood grandma who never failed to indulge one with a kind word or genuine affection. She was at every occasion in the locality—congratulating school graduates, officiating condolence meets for the bereaved, joining the chorus for wedding songs or turning up to share in the joys of newborns.

Her unflagging spirit was legendary and one would always see her attending to one chore or another. And while she was appreciably aware of the deep respect people gave her, the nurturing, maternal caretaker that she was, she never took her stature seriously and many a times would be seen walking the road fetching merchandise to and from her son's butchery near the bridge.

A known Sufi, she was a regular visitor to various shrines around the city. Rumours abounded about her own status within the sufi hierarchies, but she would rather bemusedly brush away any inquiries into her saintliness or forays into mystical realms. Even in these gatherings, she caused a stir. The story goes that she once went to visit a very popular fakeer from Badasgam in south Kashmir, who unfortunately blessed his visitors by beating them black and blue with a walking stick. On the fateful day, as he passed by Noorie Maasi and struck her a blow, contrary to expectations, she snatched the stick and beat the fakeer to a pulp. As she left, much to her surprise, she found the crowd deserting the fakeer in droves and following her.

She treated my father with exceptional regard and maternal affection, planting her hand on his forehead—a sign of blessing without fail whenever they came across each other. I always thought this sprang from the many interventions of our family, who kept her temperamental husband at bay whenever his resentment over her insistence on getting her children educated boiled over. His chagrin sprang from their unwillingness to share the burden of his hereditary butcher trade, which sometimes led to spats and threats of harming her or their children. It was much later that I discovered from my aunt that Noori Massi's affection for my father sprang from something more than a neighbour's tough son intervening when her husband pulled a knife on her eldest son in a fit of rage over his refusal to slaughter and skin animals. The reason dated back to something that had occurred during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war.

I

In the late summer of 1965, Pakistan launched its covert Operation Gibraltar under the command of Major General Akhtar Malik's Twelfth Division Headquarters at Murree. The D-Day was set for 9 August 1965. The plan envisaged widespread protests commemorating the overthrow of Sheikh Abdullah; the protestors would be augmented by armed Pakistani special forces teams, who would then spearhead the takeover of key installations and radio stations, whereby an independent Kashmir would be announced. This nucleus would foment a full-fledged widespread revolt across the Vale and Jammu, much like Hungary in 1956. To this end, five task forces comprising elements from the Pakistani army's elite Special Services group infiltrated the Vale and the Jammu highlands to help foment a general uprising against India.

The plan fizzled out, as an already apprehensive and intimidated population coupled with the hubris of the planners and feet dragging by local elements put the plan to naught. An oft-repeated anecdote is that during the build-up to this plan, a local point man keenly received the cash bags but refused to accept the weapons caches with the derisory comment, 'What do they (Pakistanis) think, their sister f**kers will be operating these guns here.' This man was later given an important bureaucratic assignment after Sheikh Abdullah returned to power in 1975. Another bizarre anecdote involved a very oppressive police officer from downtown who, while patrolling, abused who he thought was a village bumpkin washing at a village stream in Budgam district, only to be put in the crosshairs of an automatic rifle by the fellow, who was a Special Services Group commando in mufti; he was let off after he demonstrated his penitence. The bazaar grapevine in Srinagar, though, contrived the story that the police officer's temerity had earned him much censure and shame, and as punishment, the commando had branded his bum with a hot coin.

The infiltrators fought pitched battles with the Indian army in the rural areas as well as in Srinagar, where the conflagration saw the Batmalyun locality razed to the ground in broad daylight. To avoid getting caught or trapped in a pincer, the fighters, like many of their comrades-in-arms, scattered through the lanes and by-lanes of the city awaiting extrication or joined up with others.

Even as India declared war on Pakistan in retaliation, the city was put under strict curfew. The city's over-excited populace took to their roofs to catch a glimpse of Pakistani Fizay'a's* Sabre jets on their bombing runs, and the overly imaginative among them manufactured stories of female Pakistani pilots making their sorties over the Dal Lake so they could carry home a lotus flower as proof and a token of flying in Kashmir.

The auxiliary Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) policemen brought in from mainland India especially earned a reputation for brutality at this time. My father escaped a beating and his daring earned him a notch in his street-fighting reputation. Accosted by a PAC policeman, who tried to hit him with the butt of his rifle, my father, with his quick reflexes, parried the blow, and then delivered a swift punch to the policeman's face that sent him reeling with a bloodied nose and slashed lips. My father made good his escape through the riverside footpath and ensconced himself in a boathouse till the search for him died down. But others weren't so lucky. An overly sentimental anti-Indian sloganeering neighbour was brutally beaten with, bayonets thanks to his passionate and spirited abuse of the who's who of ruling politicians, including Lal Bahadur Shastri, the prime minister of India at that time.

Another downtowner, Professor Zaz who taught botany, was so brutally beaten by these policemen on the Sri Pratap college campus that he still limped when he taught me, a good twenty-five years after the incident.

II

It was during one of the night-time blackouts that Noorie Massi called out for my father from her window. Opening up his bedroom window, the sight unnerved my father. A large posse of police had surrounded Noorie Maasi's house and she was insistently and vigorously arguing that in her husband's absence, she wouldn't let a gayr mahram enter her home. The police gave in to her protestations and let her choose whomever she trusted enough to remain with her as the search proceeded. She with her quick wit loudly blurted my dad's name in a moment, perhaps keeping in mind both his stature as well as the close proximity of the homes.

My father was awakened from his deep sleep by his younger sister. Opening the window of his first-floor room, a torchlight shone in his direction and familiar voices greeted him. Flummoxed, he came down onto

the street and saw that some of the local police officers leading the paramilitary posse search were known to him. Even as the pleasantries were exchanged, my father vehemently argued against the detaining of Noori Massi's juvenile son, and given that this was a time when the civil services had value and stature, he succeeded. The search concluded, leaving my father befuddled by the whole episode. The police officers had claimed that Noori Massi was harbouring an undercover Pakistani army man in her home. If what they said was true, it would have been quite reckless of Massi to do so, given the times and the risks involved.

A busy man, my father had little time and patience to ponder over the nuances of the situation or surmise over the aftermath. The ramifications of his intervention, though, were to be felt by my grandfather firsthand.

A few days later, as an extended family get-together progressed in our home, a youngish man in a labourer's attire knocked on our door and asked for my father. Since he wasn't at home, my grandfather listened pensively as the man introduced himself as a Pakistani army lad. The man wanted to thank my father personally for having helped delay the search at Noorie Massi's home. Expressing his gratitude, the man offered his personal weapon, a pistol, as a token of gratitude.

With a sense of foreboding, my grandfather demurred; the guests assembled in our home included the then deputy inspector general of police, who was related to the family.

Epilogue

In 2003, I was driving a well-known Kashmiri Pandit mystic and poet around Srinagar. He was the guest of a father's friend, who did not have a car to show him around in. As I drove Shyam ji over the Safa Kadal bridge, he inquired after Noorie Massi. I was somewhat taken aback, but I replied that she was well, and curious, asked how he knew her. His answer was interesting; Noorie Massi was a Sufi and was well-known in the mystical circles, which was not surprising, given the relative paucity of women in those circles.

A few days later I stopped by my old neighbourhood to listen to the local street celebrity Muneer Pandit aka Munna's latest poetic/comic rhapsody. Noorie Massi passed by, and as usual I went forward to wish her. As she smilingly blessed me, I noticed her panting and breathlessness; her

asthma was worsening she told me with a smile and her medicines seemed not to be working lately. She walked on and I returned to the gathering.

Among the participants in the post-poetic rendition banter was a well-known ophthalmologist, a neighbour who went on to narrate an interesting anecdote. Back in 1981 after gaining admission in medical college, he had been directed to get his paperwork vouched for at the State Secretariat. At the gate, his entry was delayed as the security guard noted down his personal details. It was there that he saw Noorie Massi, wearing her trademark burka, approach the Secretariat gates and then vehemently curse the security detail to hell for not letting her through. Unable to convince them to let her pass, her violent protestations devolved into a loud ruckus until the chief minister's car arrived at the gate. As the doctor stood watching, Noorie Massi blocked the path of the old black Mercedes car and then brought the full force of her fists down on to the car's bonnet. The car door opened and out stepped Sheikh Abdullah, still a stalwart figure of Vale politics at that time. Much to the surprise of everyone, he walked up to Massi, conversed briefly with her in a reverential tone, led her to his official car and drove her in personally.

One could dismiss the episode as a politician's tokenism and patronizing gesture, but who knows, perhaps she had some stature, some voice accrued through her acts and the very visible strength of character marked on her face.

The octogenarian Massi passed away in her sleep in 2007. I was far away, having left my hearth for more safer and promising confines of United Kingdom. When I returned for a visit that year, I was informed of her death. As I walked the street outside her home, I remembered a particularly bad day in 1999 when members of a paramilitary patrol had detained me here briefly to check my ID. Thinking that I was about to be consigned to some torture cell, I saw Noorie Massi's fierce protective instincts and her indomitable fighting spirit on full display even as she vehemently argued with the patrol leader creating such a loud ruckus that the soldiers thought it better to leave me alone and be on their way.

I know that this is not the only instance that I will remember her for.

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*Fizay'a: 'Air Force' in Under.

The ‘Political’ Coiffeur

Whoever said the world was fair?

CASSANDRA CLARE, *City of Bones*

VOLTAIRE IS CONSIDERED to be the father of modern political opinion for putting forth the concept of political opinion blending reason with humanism. This laid the foundations of modern democracy. His *The Age of Louis XIV* is a masterly treatise that not only castigates the monarchical system but also offers an insight into the mind of a political philosopher who irrevocably changed the face of polity for the future. The implementation of his ideas in the third world ironically also led to the formation of perversely mutated half-formed political structures fatally susceptible to exploitative traits, something the Pakistani-American intellectual Eqbal Ahmad—of the Harrisburg Seven fame—termed ‘democratic pathologies’.

These democratic pathologies have exacted a price though on societies, on individuals—both well meaning and ill seeking—through upended societies and destroyed families.

I

As long as public memories went, the Safa Kadal area inhabitants collectively referred to us Mirs as ‘Mir Puri’—a reference to the family roots and ancestors arriving a century and a half back from the Jammu foothills after losing out in a rebellion against the Lahore Sikh Durbar. We had come over to the Vale, lost out on our linguistic moorings through marriages and socialization, and morphed into true blood downtowners with no period of time. But somehow I noticed, like many cousins, we were

different in some way; our innately tribal instincts that saw even baying for blood-warring families within the clan close ranks and standing together in case of adversity or outsider attack; the family's peculiar rituals: like the regular obeisance that the clan paid at the Syed Brother trio shrine—sited pat next to the clan's original redoubts in Haft Yarbal area of Safa Kadal—at the same time violently restricting public access to it but also being averse to seek profit or privilege from it. Or the regular gatherings, where parents saw the elders anecdotes of past as well as drill us with their over-emphasis on standing up for the weak, honour, loyalty to blood and defiance.

My late father was a chip off the old block of what he himself termed as a rather noisy, opinionated and largely self-absorbed clan. A stocky and tough hewn individual exhibiting an 'up-yours' apathetic attitude towards politics and politicians. Unlike his siblings—a bullying sextet who were congenitally disposed to flaunt their naturally endowed intimidating personas—dad felt it was useless to flaunt what he felt was the clan's permanent heraldry symbols, mentioned above, that had so much else to offer others rather than just obdurate behaviour or hard-headedness. Recollections of friends and foes alike attending his wake decades later depicted him as an energetic, leonine, street-smart adolescent loitering the streets and by-lanes of Safa Kadal and Chattabal in the downtown area, where many a times he wound up bloodying the noses of people twice his age and size. Dad's accrual of individual status or his climbing up a different social register never dimmed the innate humanity he possessed. He also never forgot his childhood playmates. People especially remembered him being fiercely protective of the puny Noor, a hairdresser's son rendered physically challenged by a polio affliction.

In the early 1960s, dad, a second-generation civil servant and no stickler for the prevalent bourgeois conformism, was fervently pursuing his passions of cruising on his black Enfield 350 bike and acquiring the works of Lytton Strachey, Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy, Doyestovsky, Leo Tolstoy and Ernest Hemingway, among others, for an ever-expanding library. Around the same time, his childhood buddy, Noor, now orphaned, inherited his family business. He spruced up and started working at the neighbourhood hair saloon, which was sited next to a little-known monastic retreat where centuries before the Turkic mystic, Syed Jamaluddin Bukhari, had arrived surreptitiously from his native Uzbekistan, to impart concluding

mystical instruction to its resident—Makhdoom Hamza Raina, the patron saint of the city.

II

I remember Noor as a wiry, arid man wearing a worn-out black karakul felt cap at a slant and given to temperamental displays of authority when it came to disciplining an especially slow worker at his shop. Born into a family of economically limited means, his verve and hard work complemented his stylist's skills, and attenuated the strenuousness of the extra workload resulting from his handicapped limbs. The goodwill of his friends ensured a steady clientele.

His profession and its income, by no means over the top, should have left him satisfied at being relegated to the permanent underclass of society. Not Noor, though. His impassioned support for the Plebiscite Front political party and his innate proclivity for politicking put him on a trajectory that in time would convert his political zeal into a form of power exercise.

In the mid-1970s, after unsuccessfully pushing the plebiscite issue for twenty-two odd years, the Plebiscite Front reverted to its National Conference avatar by burying the plebiscite demand and, to quote one of its satraps, 'chose to end their political vagrancy'. The 'magnanimous' quid pro quo from Delhi's power corridors saw them returning to power and resuming their position as the most popular political party in the Vale. Few people at that time would have surmised that this act would be the trigger of a grand cataclysm timed for future.

In the immediate term though, this new dispensation opened up new vistas for diehard young party Turks like Noor to come forth, and using their political credit and verve to good measure, succeed in their ambitions of morphing into men of consequence. Destiny's beguiling moves saw Noor's meteoric rise through the ranks, wherein a semi-forgettable grunt worker assumed the role of a local halqa-level political functionary. In the Vale, this meant being the arbiter of disputes and the custodian of social mores and morality in those days.

I vividly remember whenever dad took both of us siblings for a haircut, we would find the fiery and voluble Noor unselfconsciously dominating every conversation. In his hastily arranged kangaroo court, he would pass the final words of a binding arbitration in family and fence disputes or mete

out his especially degrading penalties on youngsters accused of moral turpitude.

There was a host of hangers-on and genuine fans that crowded Noor's shop. This lot depended on Noor to interpret the world for them and the manoeuvring needed within its confines. I noticed the nonchalance that my own dad exhibited towards the stiffly formal Noor and his stature. They never saw each other in terms of anything but childhood buddies and their talks hovered around families, the children's education and the occasional invite for the annual supplication dinner at home.

A wealthy carpet dealer who was a diehard Noor fan once bumped into dad in New Delhi and since dad failed to recognize him, he talked of the earlier times when the harshly gelid days would see dad walk into the shop. Before marching on to savour the warmth of the hamam and a hot shower, dad would almost always give the hangers-on some money to fetch a warm harissa breakfast for everyone in the shop. The carpet dealer, a hardened National Conference party worker who had its election symbol of the plough tattooed on his hand, and went on to criticise militant violence, Pakistan and separatist politics on a mid-1990 Doordarshan TV broadcast—that earned him the ire of the underground—would ironically afterwards go on to spend years in Tihar Jail, convicted of laundering slush funds routed from abroad meant for stoking the conflict.

Being quite young at that time, my memories of Noor's role in the 1977 election are hazy. But I do remember that when our house was misidentified and attacked by NC cadres as part of their political pogrom, dad not only refused any payment or compensation from remorseful Noor's apologetic party but, unlike many other people who went on to hold lifetime grudges against Noor and his cronies, let it go too.

I do remember Noor being on the forefront of active political canvassing in the 1983 elections. With Sheikh Abdullah dead, his son, Farooq Abdullah, the new potentate, eagerly stepped into his father's shoes, riding the wave of goodwill created by the heavyweight political persona of his deceased father. Many described him as being endowed with a mercurial disposition. Others dismissed him as a congenital dimwit whose saturnalian afflictions would acquire such notorious magnitude as to attract the acerbic pen of the renowned leftist intellectual Tariq Ali.

Farooq nevertheless came to acquire the reins of political power with relative ease of effort, as much as that required to acquire a family

heirloom. Thoroughly inept as an administrator, Farooq's political fortunes were destined to wax and wane, alternately rendering his stature from that of monarch to flotsam with considered regularity, and with the contribution of his own efforts and those of his enemies sitting in Delhi. He persevered and performed comebacks by gauging that his electability to public office was a measure of an operatic parody of politics, combining the populist appeal of his political genealogy with the public image of an amiable neighbourhood dunce whom everyone couldn't help but like.

In 1983, the untiring efforts of jubilant supporters like Noor cast the seal of public approval on the neo-potentate. These diehard party loyalists proved worthy of a sterling repute. With their ears firmly planted to the ground and their innate organizing skills, they made good their promise of a record vote harvest in favour of the party. The coronation of Farooq was the cakewalk they had promised. The change of the old guard brought in some cynical criticism. The new faces consisted of lightweights, including among others, founding members of a downtown singing club, and newly educated peasants—people with no base and who could never pose a challenge to the leader's position within the dispensation.

To celebrate the election victory, Noor's wish to prove his worth to the electorate was fulfilled when he succeeded in getting the new potentate to address a rally in Safa Kadal, which itself was no mean achievement. With traditional folk musicians providing the background score, Noor proudly stood shoulder to shoulder with his leader on the big stage erected by his zealous effort in record time. In his prefatory speech, Noor re-promised his undying loyalty to the National Conference party and the potentate, ascribing his passion and efforts to a fulfilment and reprise of the oath he had taken on the altar of a sacred political project of the deceased 'Great Leader' Sheikh Abdullah years ago. The tall Farooq Abdullah stood up, towering above everyone else on the stage. His well-wrought and patronizing speech, melded with deftly choreographed movements of his limbs, spoke of the past and his father's love for the common people. The grip-and-grin session culminated in an impassioned declamation wherein he promised them the sky, and an extended thank you to a crowd exhibiting festooned loyalties.

Joining in the frenzied sloganeering in support were Noor and his acolytes, and what amused the child in me was the presence of Atique Qazi, another childhood mate of my father's, who on Noor's insistence had

finally acquiesced to donning a half-red and half-green kurta pyjama bedecked with party symbols for the occasion. This marriage of red and green in Atique's dress symbolized the potentate's successful reach out to his namesake rival Mirwaiz Farooq to try burying the hatchet between the two traditional rivals and prevent a decades-old enmity from boiling over again. Everyone wanted to avoid a reprise of the violence of 1977 that had set the streets afire, inflicting lasting damaging on the public morale of the old city. This in itself was significant. But involved observers saw this as an attempt to patronize Mirwaiz by the neo-potentate in an effort to accumulate power whilst avoiding any competition. It was just a matter of time before the Mirwaiz found himself gaining nothing tangible from the accord.

Noor's successful convincing of the perpetually grumpy Atique—whose intractable ataxia made him suffer incessant bullying—was no mean feat. Even as the 'junior Great Leader' was carried forth on the shoulders of the people, Noor had finally earned the proverbial chip of what in mafiosi lingo is termed a 'made guy' on his shoulder and having proved his worth, he sought to consolidate his power. This added confidence of an achiever must have done wonders for his self-worth and image.

III

But the celebration and the euphoria didn't last long. The snag in the plot came less than a year later, when the Indira Gandhi government at the centre dismissed the Abdullah government. Through a mix of intrigue and chicanery, she placed Farooq's brother-in-law, Ghulam Muhammad Shah—a restless pretender to the chief minister slot—in the much-coveted chief minister's chair. The egregious manner in which the central government, acting through a pliant governor, had inveigled the elected representative and upended the popular mandate left the common people incensed and seething with feelings of revenge for the perceived disenfranchisement. The authorities clamped a continuous preventive curfew to forestall a violent backlash, but to no avail.

People took to the streets. Widespread disturbances ensued in the old city including in our Safa Kadal locality. For days on end demonstrators—many masked, some not—rained stones and havoc on the police phalanxes. Protestors all over downtown were shot and killed. The police not only beat

the arrestees badly but also stripped naked scores of protestors publicly as a punitive measure before detaining them for months on end. I remember the bleeding welts scored on the back of one of my uncle's—dad's younger cousin—who was severely belted by policemen for a display of defiance in front of our house. Even though cornered, he continued hurling invectives and raining blows on the constables. Ironically, even as his cousins were being hauled off to lock-ups, dad was assigned the magistracy of downtown's worst affected areas where his pusillanimous predecessors had mishandled the situation and many precious lives had been lost in police firings. Being a local, his presence, familiarity with the area and perhaps personal touch had a salutary effect on the environs and brought in much-needed peace without the use of force. I could sense his simmering anger at the repressive measures.

Underneath the surface, a subtle change slowly became palpable. Instead of National Conference cadres, I witnessed bands of brickbat-throwing young men up close. This was a mobile vanguard bound by college student fraternities, whose defiance and anarchist behaviour patterns were untrammelled by the repressive measures. These boys were leading the stone-pelting mobs, sometimes fording the river in canoes to bypass curfewed roads, opening up new fronts in various downtown neighbourhoods. Many a times, they would be seen with trophies, police batons and belts, helmets, shields and police khaki caps snatched from policemen who suffered the ill luck of being cornered by them. Within Safa Kadal I saw many graduate to Molotov cocktails in renewed, violent confrontations with the police posses, who for them symbolized corrupt, unrepresentative power. Years later, as the insurgency erupted in 1990, I again came across at least one of the Molotov cocktail throwers, this time patrolling a downtown street with a gleaming Russian-made Kalashnikov firmly clutched in his hand.

Noor's political conditioning had inculcated such a biased world view thah he was totally disconnected from these events. He couldn't astutely discern the generational change, as well as the mood of the young protestors and above all, the disquieting political shifts. Given the National Conference loyalist family backgrounds of many of these lads, his old-school outlook overlooked the very divergent philosophical rationale behind the youngsters' resort to extreme violence. He, like many others, mistook their ferociousness as fervent support for his grand old political party.

One of my dad's cousins arrested for stone-pelting witnessed firsthand how Noor immersed himself in providing succour to the incarcerated party workers. It was just a matter of time before rumours of arrest warrants for Noor started making their rounds. Averse to the humiliation that his arrest would entail, Noor went underground for a while. But given his family responsibilities and economic circumstances, he preferred hiding out in his home. One night, the police posse finally came calling. The presence of his detached prosthesis gave him away. Noor's release from jail saw him thoroughly subdued and browbeaten. He went back to hairstyling after putting up an anodyne 'political discussions disallowed' poster—handwritten in Urdu by Rashid, his young son—prominently inside the shop. But if the powers at the helm had surmised that incarceration would force Noor to waver in his faith and unshakeable conviction in his political ideology and party, they were mistaken.

From time to time the downtown populace too expressed their resentment violently. In mid-1985, a senior cabinet minister of the much maligned 'usurper' government was badly beaten up in the main square of Safa Kadal even as Noor and other supporters stood to welcome their toppled leader Farooq Abdullah, who as usual was running late for his star appearance at the brief drive through rally. Topping the list of culprits who went underground after the police issued warrants and began a manhunt for them, was Azeem.

Azeem Dulloo was a pudgy thirty-something baker with an enviable sense of vernacular humour that made him immensely popular in the area. He slogged unearthly hours come rain, snow or sunshine in the dingy, smoke-filled environs of his bakery, situated near the right side of the Safa Kadal bridge. Azeem's most treasured possession was a Philips transistor, which was constantly playing Hindi and Urdu songs, providing a background score while he kneaded enormous quantities of dough or tossed hundreds of pieces of unbaked lawasa bread into the tandoor oven every morning. His perpetually grumpy father worked in the same bakery and seemed a total antithesis of his affable and polite son who loved engaging everyone, young and old, sane and insane in his acts of leg-pulling, ribbing, mimicry, and jabs and barbs.

On that fateful day, Azeem had finished his daily chores and was in the bakery selling the local version of bagels. The road leading to and from the Safa Kadal bridge used to be quite narrow back then and traffic was moving

at a snail's pace. Caught in the traffic was the senior cabinet minister's car. The minister's presence proved to be a noxious provocation for Azeem who instantly recognized him. Leaping from his shop counter, he dragged the politician out of his official car. Within seconds a crowd joined the melee, egging Azeem on while they themselves manhandled and battered the driver and the secretary, wrestling them to the ground. Not content with landing punches and kicks, Azeem retrieved a baked clay kanger and brought it down on the politician's head with such force that the politician lost consciousness.

A kind soul nevertheless, Azeem survived the manhunt to prematurely die of cancer a couple of years later. Tragedy struck his family again in 1991 when his younger brother, a militant, got entangled in the robbing and killing of the 'Doba Khaar' siblings. The two brothers ran a famed cycle repair shop in the main Safa Kadal square. Azeem's brother and his accomplices were summarily executed by members of their own tanzeem in front of scores of onlookers on the Nala Maar Road in broad daylight. The organization's senior leaders, unsettled by the public uproar that followed the brutal slaying of the septuagenarian mechanics, who hadn't harmed a fly in all their lives, had no choice but to have the culprits executed.

IV

In the beginning of 1985, while Noor and his ilk waited for a propitious change of political fortunes, their party swept the parliamentary election with a huge margin. However, at the state level, they were still in the doghouse. The summer of that year would also be remembered for when the GeNext youngsters openly revolted against the cult of the much venerated and deceased leader of Noor's party, Sheikh Abdullah. Their questioning of his role in posterity not only corroded his stature, but loosened the grip of his aura, which had metastasized and left their own kith, kin and elders like Noor enthralled and in a state of perpetually beholden deference to the National Conference organization.

This new generation, buoyed by greater political exposure and higher levels of education, was very different from Noor's generation. Much like their parents' generation, this cohort felt politically unrepresented and considered itself disenfranchised. But unlike their elders, the younger generation felt the political emasculation perpetrated on them was a

consequence of the timidity and a lack of martial spirit of the older generation, which in the views of these new radicals, had allowed an oppressive state to exercise its powers to browbeat them. In their view, to get out of this quagmire, the state's monopoly of violence had to be broken. Conversations cropped up everywhere, including at weddings I attended, where young men in their early and late twenties increasingly emphasized the threats to their religio-ethnic identity and the non-implementation of the plebiscite as recommended by the United Nations Security Council in 1948; they felt violence was an effective, empowering option for affecting political change.

The imagination of these youngsters was stirred starting in July 1985, when the Regal Cinema in the city centre ran the iconic film *Lion of the Desert,* directed by Mustapha Akkad and starring Anthony Quinn and Irene Papas, to packed houses. Only this time, the moviegoers perhaps got a reality jolt. The comparison of their own dominating and iconic political figure Sheikh Abdullah with the Libyan revolutionary, Omar Mukhtar, was found wanting. Droves of moviegoers, after every show, came out and rioted. In the city centre and elsewhere, they destroyed the posters and commemorative billboards of the 'Great Leader', Sheikh Abdullah. These widespread disturbances threatened to escalate, so in the fourth week of its running, as the violence got out of control, the film was forced off the screens by the powers that be. Ironically, the replacement—the Sylvester Stallone starrer *First Blood*, depicting a lone warrior fighting his own war against government authority and emerging victorious—did little to dampen their spirit. The vivid portrayal of a violent individual with a potential for destruction made John Rambo a household name in Srinagar. Whether Anthony Quinn or Sylvester Stallone stirred the violent imagination or went pari passu with it is a matter of debate.

The sequels to *Lion of the Desert,* as well as *First Blood,* went viral on the video circuit, pointing to the appeal of, and priming of, the minds of the general population to envisage the use of violence to propel political progression.

But I am not sure that these films inspired the first wave of young men to cross the border. The attempt of a previous generation in the late 1960s—who had even borrowed the Palestine Liberation Organization's Arabic adage, Al-Fatah—had ended in a fiasco. But this time around, rugged Afghans were bludgeoning the mighty Soviet Red Army in an asymmetric

war being fought only a couple of hundred miles away as the crow flies. The country next door, Pakistan, was the conduit for funnelling arms and imparting training. Furthermore, General Zia-ul-Haq's military junta was in power. For the first time after the humiliating defeat of 1971, Pakistan military felt that it had the wherewithal to get the Kashmir dispute out of the cold freezer it had been dispatched to by the Shimla Agreement—which they felt was contrived by a very disingenuous and devious, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and flush in victory mirror image Indira Gandhi—and it loved to fish in troubled waters. For Zia-ul-Haq, the time to come and consign the Shimla Agreement to dustbin had arrived and this could be best achieved by changing the whole ground situation in Indian side of Kashmir into something that every option became a detriment to Indian interests.

The first volunteers across the LoC were a motley mix of urban and rural lads with ethno-religious conditioning and, as was later discovered, whose self-image rested on the Afghan rebel fighters—whose war videos had clandestinely commenced flooding the urban video circuits by then. General Zia-ul-Haq met this pilot batch and promised a reprise of Bangladesh—Mukti Bahini—Indian intervention scenario, wherein a full fledged indigenous insurgency would acquire such a critical mass that Pakistan Army intervention at an opportune time would easily cleave Kashmir state from Indian rule.

V

In February 1986, Chief Minister Ghulam Mohammad Shah's controversial decision to construct a mosque on the premises of the Jammu secretariat led to Jammu's Hindutva brigades launching an agitation with overly violent anti-Kashmiri overtones. From the rooftops of the dak bungalow apartments in Jammu city where we wintered regularly, I witnessed the crowds chanting slogans of '*Pakistani kuttay hye hye',* even as they beat and forcibly stripped naked many Valleyites who were walking the roads. Within my sight a mass of Kashmiris—dandies, as well as labourers—assembled near the Jammu and Kashmir Arts Emporium building, a known landmark in Jammu city centre, and raised Islamist slogans before commencing to rain rubble and stones on the Jammu crowds. A large-scale riot between the Kashmiri and Jammu crowds was in the offing, though a major conflagration was averted by the timely action of the police.

Ironically, this time, the police—overpopulated with Kashmiris—put the whole city under a curfew and vented their fury on the Jammu crowds while being openly soft towards their own ethnic brethren.

The Vale erupted after rumours and news of these disturbances reached Srinagar. Within the city itself, there was large-scale violence against the state apparatus. The Kashmiri Pandit minority community was targeted in south Kashmir and their properties were vandalized, though without loss of life. To quote Inder Salim, a Kashmiri Pandit and a performing artist living there, the Kashmir Pandits pinned the blame of this vicious anti-minority violence to have been orchestrated by Mufti Syed, a mainstream Congress party leader who was loath to see himself marginalized in the changing political scenario.

Within days, in the first week of March 1986, the state governor Jagmohan dismissed the incumbent G.M. Shah government and imposed his direct rule, which lasted until the next Abdullah–Gandhi accord of early 1987. But that intervening year was eventful with regard to the ferment brewing within. Something innate to Jagmohan's psychological make-up saw him act with hostile, indeed resentful disdain, in his exercise of viceregal power eerily reminiscent of the ruthlessly imperial disdain that the Dogra monarchs had for the Kashmiri subjects.

The generation of older Kashmiris who remembered the Dogra ban on bovine slaughter and even fishing was still around at the time when Jagmohan took over the reins of administration, his subsequent acts and promulgations were seen by the Kashmiri Muslims in particular as being driven by an assertive bigoted agenda. The GeNext weaned on stories of Dogra monarchist depredations and Indian perfidies, construed the government's actions as intensely and overly prejudicial anti-Muslim overtones that reeked of obsession to demonstrate to a Muslim populace who its lord and master was. In a society where even Brahmins were non-vegetarian, he not only imposed bans on bovine slaughter but ordered the closure of butcheries on certain days, when sale and consumption of meat was considered profane to Hindu religious sentiments. While it is pretty much unbelievable that he could have done what he did without acquiescence of Rajiv Gandhi government, it behoves poor political judgement and lack of competence to seek to provoke a restive population. The year 1986 saw the Afghan Mujahideen smashing the air superiority of the Soviet Red army even as Stingers were introduced. It would only take a

confidently blind person to not surmise that the tsunami brewing hardly hundred odd miles away as the crow flies wouldn't hit the shores of Kashmir sooner or later.

Instead of seeking to mend his bad repute earned in July 1984, Jagmohan as governor made it some kind of a mission to see his sentimental attachment to his confession on a one-way street clash with the socio-political and religious sensibility of the local overwhelmingly Muslim-populated state. Srinagar witnessed renewed student unrest after the medical and engineering college entrance exam qualifying list was deemed discriminatory towards the majority Muslim community as it overrepresented the minority Kashmiri Pandit community. Promulgations deeming erosive to state's autonomy were instituted, including laws concerning prisoners who could now be rendered outside of Kashmir.

Not wanting a repeat of the 1983 West Indies vs India cricket match, which had seen the locals sledging and booing the Indian team, a match against Australia at the local stadium saw the locals being outnumbered in the stands by plainclothes army and paramilitary personnel. This was followed by disturbances in Baramullah town, where scores of demonstrators were shot dead by by paramilitary policeman in cold blood.

In retrospect, I think a straight line can be drawn from the hanging of Maqbool Bhat, the founder of JKLF, whose party ideology always envisaged an Independent Kashmir free from both Indian and Pakistani rule, in February 1984 in Tihar Jail to these events. Since Sheikh Abdullah, who had in a way monopolized the ethno-confessional politics of the state, had died two years back, Maqbool's hanging catapulted his ideations and JKLF as a term into the wider public imagination, adding to the cauldron of anti-India ferment brewing around. It was only a matter of time before the events around it would consume the Vale.

These strife-torn events were the beginnings, which historians willing to broach this subject in the future will need to consider as a prelude to the violent insurgency in the beginning of 1990.

VI

The unsettling year of governor's rule finally ended in March 1987, when elections were declared. Jagmohan's actions and Farooq Abdullah's seeking accommodation with the Rajiv Gandhi government saw the anti-India space

being earnestly vacated. The younger contrarian generation now converged under the banners of a newly formed political party, Muslim United Front. On that fatefully overcast and drizzling election day in March 1987, their cadres contrived an air of challenge and strove to show their presence and ensure that the election for Noor's party wasn't the cakewalk that it used to be previously. The effusive sentiment of assertive ethno-religious identity—previously the claim of the National Conference in its halcyon days—had them stirred in no little measure and the genesis of a militant overground to spur a violent ramification, which people like Noor were prone to dismiss as a figment of someone's nightmare, sequenced.

I came across the violent schism that had taken hold in our small community. Political lines pitted fathers against their sons and nephews against their uncles, neighbours against neighbours. For these youngsters, Noor's National Conference party represented—with its lies, self-flattery, corrupting narrow mindedness and protected self-serving privileges—a cancer eating into the body politic. They saw people like Noor and much of the previous generation as being blind to what the Abdullah family and its ilk had wrought in the Vale. Many of the old political hands were no match for this GeNext. As the dust settled, a compromise was reached wherein both contesting parties would each rig half of the remaining votes. As a result of this, a total of 1,600 votes were polled in a polling station that had only 1,400 registered voters on its rolls. In what came to be viewed a massively rigged election, the only option for Noor's unimaginative party apparatchiks, unused to the notions of restraint and political maturity, was to resort to organized political gangsterism to violently mute and overwhelm the youngsters' challenge. Though Noor's party still emerged triumphant, it initiated a political pogrom similar to the one that had victimized people like him previously. These actions would have far-reaching repercussions.

On Eid-ul-Zuha day that year, the Eidgah ground was inundated by truckloads of slogan-shouting opposition activists protesting the gerrymandering and repressive measures. They proceeded to violently disrupt the mass prayers about to commence. They also manhandled the imam and forced Farooq Abdullah, the chief minister, who was to join in the prayers—a custom harking back to his father's time—to scuttle his plans and scupper. The aftershocks of this incident rapidly spread into downtown and our area, situated a mere half-mile from the epicentre. Older

community members scurrying from the trouble spot cursed the opposition activists. The ruling party cadre was swiftly mobilized by Noor to mount a payback within the locality.

At around two o' clock, even as I, a pimply schoolboy, hollered my cousin's name outside his home asking him to fetch the knives for the festival sacrifice, I witness the brutal assault on the main opposition activist by one of Noor's acolytes. Only the sheer strength of the activist, a former wrestler, saw him survive the profusion of wooden stave blows before he pinned down the attacker and escaped the scene. This was the trigger; within moments his relatives came out and a full-fledged fight broke out, which rapidly spread through the locality, acquiring the hues of a generational clash dividing the denizens horizontally into opposite camps.

The targeting of the opposition activists was methodical, but the reaction hadn't been muted as desired. Noor watched it all, safely ensconced in his belief that no one could muster the courage to mount a direct challenge to his person. That was, until a reckless and blundering elder cousin of mine, egged on by other youngsters, confronted Noor on the main street early the following morning, hurling the choicest expletives and abuse specifically smudging the repute of his household's womenfolk. This was unheard of before. I stood there watching the stoic Noor and his henchmen, who let the attacker go without reacting or even raising a finger or a voice in return.

Noor handled it like a politician, astute enough not to headbutt the coat of armour that our clan's reach and repute for hard-headedness proffered to even its most obtuse members. He perhaps knew that a blood feud would ensue if his purported move was deigned an affront to their honour by the clan patriarchs. In retrospect, I think Noor knew our family better than my cousin or his cohort.

Unable to let anyone lording over or acknowledging supremacy of any Tom, Dick and Harry who found a sense of existence by venturing into politics, our clan had been embroiled in vicious wrangling with the sartraps who came onto the fore from time to time, afflicted with a self-rendered derisive apathy for politics after many of the older members enduring severe financial and emotional losses decades before. The incident rapidly made its way to the ears of the elders. They were aghast at the temerity of a young member and his foray into petty street politics, but above all, and this was unforgivable, at his abuse of privilege. A cardinal rule of deference—

respecting elders known to the hierarchy of an overly patriarchal family—had been broken. My dad, his swollen eyes and irritated voice depicting suppressed rage, sent for my cousin who scuppered to safer confines.

A couple of days later, my octogenarian paternal grandfather, Mir Abdur Rehman—a stoic, hard-edged former customs officer, who in his heydays was known for being as proficient with the knife as with his contrarian mind—miffed with an aborted attempt of the Peace Brigade members to attack our ancestral homes, famously challenged their boss (one of the most notorious Bakshi Brothers) to a man-to-man knife duel on the Safa Kadal locality's main thoroughfare. The Bakshi lad, thinking it better to scoot off from the area for a couple of days, disembarked from his white Ambassador car and walked into Noor's shop, expressing his regret for the impertinence of his grandson. From his stentorian exclamations at the family's redoubt later that day, I grasped my grandfather's deeply paternalistic world view. Noor's family had been known to the clan for generations, which brought him and his kin under a protective shadow, much like his father had been under before him. For grandfather, smudging the honour of Noor's family was a direct challenge to his own person. No wonder his anger was bursting at the seams; consequently my cousin earned and endured a deferred reprimand and a sound thrashing for his cockiness.

Weeks later one Sunday afternoon I saw the contrasting figures of the limping Noor and stocky dad walking down the street by our house. Noor, his hand perched on dad's left shoulder for support, walked lockstep with dad's slowed gait, as they both smiled, sharing some old joke or anecdote. Many years later, dad divulged his knowledge of Noor's previous vulnerable life, of how he had seen him through thick and thin, his travails, his wedding and the birth of his children, and his unending heart-breaking existential struggles. Dad added that my cousin wouldn't be able survive twenty minutes straight if the privileges he had been born with were taken away and he was put to face something akin to Noor's perpetual straitened circumstances. It was his overall never-say-die attitude that had earned Noor a measure of my dad's respect.

VII

The expression of discontent over political disenfranchisement and historical injustices among the city's populace was limited to disturbances

rocking the streets or an occasional bomb blast like the one my overly worried mother warned me of as I stepped out to watch *Tuff Turf*—a high school romance starring James Spader, Robert Downey Jr and Kim Richards—at the Palladium cinema one summer evening with school friends. Luckily, these blasts weren't lethal.

Until walking back home from school in 1988 I witnessed the aftermath of a car bomb at Court Road that had left many people injured. In the old city, everything was calm on the surface; but people were speaking in hushed tones of youngsters crossing the LoC for arms training and a deluge of Afghan war documentaries hit the old city video circuit.

On a bright summer morning in 1989, I walked nonchalantly to my tutor's home in the old city's Khanqah area, not realizing that the targeting of Abdullah's National Conference sympathizers and functionaries had begun. On the sidewalks, I witnessed scores of people crowding the roads, talking in muted voices and gesticulating heatedly. I paused when I heard that a top functionary of the ruling party had been shot dead a quarter of an hour ago. But they weren't the only one being hunted. A couple of weeks later, I boarded a minibus and sat near a majzoob, a wandering seer, who repeatedly and loudly proclaimed that an 'engine' would consume the younger generation in times to come. As the bus neared the Chinkral Mohalla area near Habba Kadal, I saw that a big crowd had gathered. The passengers boarding the bus at the stop told the other passengers about the killing of a top-ranking Kashmiri Pandit political leader that same morning.

As the 1990s unfolded, insurgents, a semi-anonymous mass in the thousands, spread their writ with the deadly, street-sweeping power of AK-47s. For them, a clean political slate was a prerequisite to achieving freedom. 1990 saw everything written before on the Valley's political slate over-ridden and erased. Even normal denizens observed omertà. Speaking one's mind cost many ordinary people their lives; the slightest hint of fame or popularity also cost people their lives.

How much these incidents affected Noor, it is hard to say. But I did notice a droop in his shoulders after the full-fledged insurgency began in January 1990. Noor reinvented himself as the streets transformed themselves; the roads that had witnessed his cohort's swagger had now squeezed them out. Political workers acquiesced in renouncing their political affiliations even as they cowered under the militant diktats. They had no choice, having been abandoned and left to fend for themselves by

their party leaders who had fled to the safer environs of Delhi and Jammu, not to forget their 'beloved junior leader' Farooq Abdullah, even farther to the temperate climes of the UK.

And so like many others, plebeians and gentry alike, Noor lived under the shadow and scourge of constant violence, fearing that he would be targeted for even imagined transgressions of lines drawn for him and his ilk by the new violent forces on the rise. From time to time Noor would inform my father that his name had been taken off the hit list by his sympathizers within the militant ranks. But his first personal disaster came from the Indian security establishment side.

One winter morning in early 1994, Noor's teenage nephew and a novitiate stylist, both of them in his employ, were picked up by the paramilitary from his barbershop during a cordon and search operation. They were later killed—either shot dead in an 'encounter' or murdered extra-judicially—within the sanctum sanctorum of the Malik Sahib Shrine's summer mosque in Safa Kadal. In the cold and dry winter afternoon I watched a pall of gloom descend on the locality as the bloodied and muddied corpses were brought in for their final rites. I too made my way to Noor's home and found the visibly benumbed and broken Noor frantically trying to hold back his tears. In the evening, the State-owned news media reported a what could only be called an imaginary fierce firefight in Safa Kadal in which two 'terrorists' had been shot dead and a large quantity of arms recovered from them.

A few weeks later, a foreign journalist doing a story on Kashmir conflict for an Italian magazine and TV turned up at his shop; Noor was holding a clipping from a vernacular newspaper that carried the pictures of the two boys and the news of the tragedy that had befallen them. Ironically, it was the wrestler, his arch nemesis from the 1987 scuffles, who acted as the interpreter. I was passing through and it was hard not to notice that the tragedy had diminished Noor both in size, heart and soul.

Years passed by and the conflict carried on with its repetitive cycles of violence, arrests and killings, which left one dazed. But by 1996, an election was announced as the establishment got the upper hand. The old political parties made a comeback and in the prelude to the election the politicians ended their exile for a mass contact program. Thoroughly chastened by his many life-changing experiences, Noor kept to himself and

continued to run his shop, miles away from the revanchist politicking of his erstwhile flock shepherd who had returned to power.

One day in the autumn of 1997, Noor was surprised to find the local legislator enter his shop. This time he wasn't riding the shoulders of supporters, but was surrounded by an armed entourage. Nobody knows for certain why the politician sought to do what he did next; whether it was past associations, or an effort to patronize a recalcitrant Noor. Disembarking from his armour-plated car and entering the shop, the politician fervently hugged Noor.

Tongues started to wag and this single hug turned out to be the signature on Noor's death warrant.

A few days later, Noor, busy as usual with the daily chores, didn't notice when an unidentified assassin walked into his shop and shot him a couple of times. Noor, brain dead, remained on life support for a few days before dying silently on a forlorn autumn night.

My father appeared stoic after he returned home from Noor's funeral.

'A life wasted. What was it that drove people to be "political" in the bygone times and end up on sides that eventually would consume their lives? Lack of prescient politics, perhaps?' I asked.

'Passion!' dad replied. 'In his formative years, Noor saw participation and suffering, and the sweeping mass mobilization and tumult following the plebiscite movement back in the 1950s and 1960s. For Noor and millions of others, who saw Sheikh Abdullah as more of a benevolent patriarch rather than a political leader, were lured by the vision of lending their shoulders for a fight for social equality and the political disempowerment so inveighed in the plebiscite polemics of the leader Sheikh Abdullah's speeches. Then there was the mythologized memorialization of pre-1953 period, a period when the stars of social justice shining bright on the political firmament and its abruption weighed heavily on the populace and Noor wasn't immune to this. This self-image of being on the right side of history perhaps not only defined him and his ilk but also inculcated the sense of hard headed self-righteousness.

'Post-1975, after the plebiscite movement was buried, Noor, living in the entropic political environs of the Vale, developed a blind spot for the real world outside, still dreaming the fanciful dream of an ideal state and its achievement, which had been interrupted by the perfidy of the Indian state, propelling attempts to regain this utopia. Unlike the idealistic Noor, the

satraps who made their appearance at the helm—lowbrows like him but very unlike him, susceptible to opportunism—remained a supine bunch of people, hollow to the core, their minds preoccupied with gaining privileges and moneymaking.

'This venal bunch of people's leaders ran away as soon as the war started, abandoning the rank and file party workers like Noor to the mercy of changed, distorted circumstances and vulnerable to horrendous acts of violence. But unlike them, dabbling in politics changed nothing for Noor in economic terms. He lived, as he had died, a man of meagre means. He never lusted for money, nor could anyone ever stick the charge of moral turpitude on him. Noor adhered to the utopian kibbutznik spirit of the party that had long been discarded by its higher echelons in their quest for power. For all the heartburn his profound politics caused, Noor didn't merit even a footnote from these ungrateful deceivers. Someday somewhere his death will be mentioned in passing by this mendacious lot for reference.'

With the autumn sun bearing down on him, my father smiled with a dour face, pulled up his sleeves and turned the water taps on; the water sprayed and glistened on the foliage and lush fruit crop the pomegranate trees had grown.

Dad's epitaph for a childhood playmate probably summed up Noor's life. For many he was nothing more than a blind statistic in the long list of victims of the war. But then I realized that he still existed, and would continue to do so, in the talk and memory of the people who knew him personally, like my dad, who had played and grown up with Noor in the streets of Safa Kadal decades back.

The Downtown Leftist

In the end what you don't surrender,
Well, the world just strips it away!

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

A COUPLE OF years ago I found myself sipping coffee with a few acquaintances at The Hideout, Srinagar city's famed last bohemian hangout. Call me a cynic—even as the discussion converged on the usual 'how society was attaining a measure of intellectual and literary autarky', I took their self-congratulatory paeans with a pinch of salt. What I saw in these personal interactions was a Peter Pan world view; the culture of this intellectuality, with its debatable quality—spawned by the social media and elsewhere, and print—being bragged about was anything but autarky. The 'sprouting like wild weeds' of desperate Edward Said wannabes habituated to turning Derrida and Iqbal into convenient punchlines by pushing their compulsive lightweight writings; their penchant for mundane celebrityhood isn't autarky. Then there is this camp follower lot whose proud morphing into native informants for every Tom, Dick and Harry coming over to research and write mediocre treatises on the Kashmir conflict marks neither the beginning nor progression of a genuine intellectual culture. While others disagreed, I was insistent on and all the more clear for adopting a self-inquiring attitude so that society at large wouldn't suffer again the farrago of hammy pretenders and self-congratulatory pseudo-intellectuals whose ambitions hovered around being seen rather than being genuine, dedicated thinkers. As in the past, few of this cohort could be deemed to be consumed by a search for themselves, or trying to understand the predicaments and the times they lived in.

Mr Muzaffar Shaw, the owner of The Hideout, whose intellectual sweep and curious mind is sort of well known—and an attendant observer of times and lives, whose friends' circle included the celebrated poet Agha Shahid Ali—interjected even as the tone of the discussion turned shrill. He made an astute observation that evolution takes time and I perhaps expected too much from people whose capabilities precluded lofty undertakings at this juncture.

He inquired about my address and the moment I said Safa Kadal, asked if I knew Nazir Gaash. I nodded in assent. Even as the other chaps turned their attention to side-conversation, Mr Shaw told me of the many times Nazir Gaash's analytical sweep and astonishingly immense knowledge of the Western philosophical oeuvre had left him exasperated and fumbling for an engaging response.

My mental clock rewound itself to years back. Yes, I knew Nazir Gaash.

Upon descending the Safa Kadal bridge, in the first lane on the left, is Gaash's decrepit provision shop, which still survives. A cursory glance at its billboard reveals its name, 'Edible Link'; an eminently unusual name for a store in this part of town. Today, the shop sports an empty look, bereft of the crowds that thronged it for two or more decades from its humble beginnings in the 1970s.

The late 1970s were a time when social conservatism and religious orthopraxy were the norm, not the exception, in much of downtown and the Safa Kadal locality where we lived. It was a time when social norms were enforced by time-tested maxims and an unwritten rule of deference to elders. Mixing of genders was frowned upon; dating and elopement would earn swift censure and punishments. Looking on to the streets, one would almost always see octogenarians whose snow-white beards and rosaries made one surmise that religiosity was second nature to them. They would make their customary rounds to the mosques, aided by walking sticks, with greater frequency than the younger crowd.

But not many people then could have imagined that it was in such surroundings that the shop would etch its name in the annals of Safa Kadal folklore along with that of its owner, a genuine intellectual and a pioneering leftist, Mr Nazir Gaash.

I

One of my earliest childhood memories revolves around the protests that gripped the Vale as Zia-ul-Haq, the military ruler of Pakistan, refused to rescind the death sentence of the deposed prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Protests erupted everywhere and effigies of Zia were immolated in every nook and corner of the city. Even small kids loitering the streets would construct mock cenotaphs of Zia or stone it in an effort to mime the outrage of their elders.

It was in the midst of this upheaval that the twenty-something Nazir Gaash found himself confronting a dilemma. He had been chosen for a goodwill visit to Hungary sponsored by the Communist party, to, in his words, forge an insight into the 'workings of the dictatorship of the proletariat' firsthand. For some time his star had been on the rise within the Vale's card-carrying communist circles. His high profile saw newbie leftists vying for his mentorship and senior communists seeking his counsel. Though in no way a sniffy sort, he harboured a very condescending view of his contemporaneous comrades, and not without reason. Years later he confided in me as we sat at his shopfront.

'The Valley communists in the 1970s were dunces no doubt! Their rank and file usually whiled away their time discussing the attributes of samovar and pherans, and contriving imaginary cultural leanings and connections between the USSR and the Vale. They repeatedly failed in or demurred from providing any assistance or backing to the trade union forays that we had initiated. But the way they pulled out all the stops in organizing demonstrations protesting Bhutto's death sentence confounded me and made me angry.'

Even as world leaders pressed Zia to pardon Bhutto, Gaash, disgusted with the 'comrades', cancelled his visit to Hungary and abruptly resigned from the party in protest.

I guess he was uniquely poised to provide a value judgement. His early life had seen him ride crests and troughs like no other. After his father passed away, Gaash dropped out of college and commenced plying his hereditary baker's trade to keep the home kitchen fires burning. One would assume that poverty and interrupted education would deter both his intellectual pursuit and political aspiration, but Gaash was to defy this maxim. His curiosity coupled with a desire to search within first led him to Marxism and then to the Western philosophical corpus. Given his razor-

sharp analytical sweep, his autodidactic forays saw him morph into a Marxist ideologue within no time.

Srinagar in the 1970s was a city plagued by corruption, poverty, exploitation and savage social discrepancies; this realization spurred Gaash to do his bit. He teamed up with the late Hriday Nath Wanchoo, a selfless communist and indefatigable human rights activist, to lay the foundations of trade unionism in the Vale. Together, they ventured into the bastis and hovels of manual scavengers to listen to their woes. They helped mobilize municipality scavengers and organized their unions so they could seek better wages and work conditions. Within his own locality and beyond, Gaash was vilified by many for what they saw as his attempts to turn impressionable scavengers into godless communists, but he laboured on until giving it all up in the spring of 1979.

This wasn't the first time that his self-searching forays had ended in his giving up a belief or practice. Years before, Gaash had briefly flirted with Buddhism, even venturing into monasteries in Ladakh. But to his dismay, he found he was confronting something other than individual enlightenment in organized Buddhism. 'I realized the *"sangham sharanam gacchami"* had acquired precedence over the "*Buddham sharanam gacchami"* and I was looking for the latter,' he told me. So he packed his bags and came home. The religious lot couldn't answer his questions on individual being and existential angst. As he later opined, much to his chagrin, post-colonial times had propelled religious trends everywhere to view the community as a mark of identity and vector of political mobilization rather than emphasize the issues of the individual or individual self-realization.

II

The profound disillusionment was perhaps too much to bear for Gaash, prompting his return to a laid-back life. But I guess he ultimately found a measure of satisfaction in the philosophy of mind that Western thinkers propagated, and he pursued it with the entire intellectual wherewithal he possessed. In time, the accretions of this pursuit supplanted the traces of the religious faith of his forebears.

His deep-thinking mind, brimming with ideas, references and knowledge, gave him strength but offered no protection from the travails that were about to reveal themselves. Around 1980, a petty argument

between one of his many friends and a cleric's son at a riverside tea joint in Safa Kadal turned into a free-for-all brawl. As the clash got out of hand, Gaash's friend let loose a couple of pistol shots in anger.

Given the paternalist social set-up and the influence of his friend's wealthy family it was Gaash—absent from the site of the scrimmage—who was marked for social crucifixion. The gathering of elders denounced Gaash as a corrupting influence on the younger generation and forced a tarq-i-mawalat—a social and economic boycott—and heaped censure and death threats on him in their crass attempt to fracture and diminish his self. But he refused to move out of the locality and persevered, and with the help of his ardent admirers, picked up the pieces of his life again. Years on, the anguish, the terrible sense of humiliation and disrepute bred by these cruelly public events hung on, relegated to some semi-visible corner of the shop like a memorialized bad dream.

In its halcyon days, Edible Link attracted all and sundry, who lent their ears to the discussions, the barbs, the shared jokes and indulgent sophisticated ribbing, all under the watchful gaze, sharp wit and keen intellect of Nazir Gaash. As I trudged home from school and vice-versa every day, my infantile world view envisaged Gaash, who always had some journal or the other in his hand, as a magazine addict. Among newspapers, *The Statesman* was his favourite. There was always a crowd massed in and around his shop, which was next to my bus stop. The air was suffused with the aroma of tea and pungent cigarette smoke as people of variant mental predilections and ideological hues—from guitar-wielding, jeans-sporting dandy liberals, to the khadi-wearing jholawala leftist bohemian crowd, from religious right-wingers bent on preventing Gaash from straying from the path, to plain schlubs gawking in amazement—gathered to listen as Gaash wove his variegated discourses encompassing everything from Marx to Nietzsche, Heidegger to Teilhard de Chardin, Kant, Hegel and Sartre, from Middle-Eastern politics to the Western hemisphere's woes, from recent political histories and the post-colonial angst to subaltern themes.

On holidays, he would hop on to a scooter, dressed in his hallmark khadi kurta and jeans with a jhola slung across his shoulders, and make his way to the famed Coffee Shop on Srinagar's Residency Road, where he would engage with a smattering of genuine intellectual sorts in search of themselves, pamphleteers, sophists and pseudo-intellectuals, or visit the cinema to watch art films.

III

My arrival at the shopfront as a teen was a far cry from my schoolboy days, when much to the chagrin of my mum, I would rack up huge bills buying chocolates and chips at the shop. Given my presumably 'good' English, nurtured on the hallowed grounds of the local Irish Catholic institution, I tried hard to understand the arguments of 'Being and Existence' being bandied about by the people at the shopfront without much success. But then, in the subsequent bright summers and harsh winters, Gaash paved my way into what he termed the 'World of Ideas', introducing me to Kant, Søren Kierkegaard and Sartre. I still fondly remember how he passed on books that he had read and wanted me to read: Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and most importantly, Turgenev's *Virgin Soil* and *Fathers and Sons*, books so afflicted with existential angst as to heighten awareness of the self and change one's world view permanently. I read the poetry of Nazim Hikmet, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Walt Whitman and Noon Meem Rashid among others, which was fascinating. I couldn't bring myself to admire much of J. Krishnamurti, whom Gaash had recently discovered.

Gaash always described himself as a nihilist and as an anarcho-syndicalist; I am not sure how many of the people thronging his shop related to his self-image or grasped the import of these terms. Within his own kindred the joke went that had Gaash realized his potential, the rest of the world wouldn't have known Tariq Ali. These professionals, from engineers to academics to professional cricketers and even a lone merchant navy man, felt stifled and alienated from the society they had been born into and no longer identified with its identitarian mores or brand of politics that construed any forays into intellectualism as blasphemous and individualism as traitorous. Gaash, with his rigorous self-awareness and candour and overarching aversion to paternalism, provided them a vent, an outlet. They were reverentially drawn towards his belief in the individual, the power of the individual and his inalienable sacredness. They locked their steps with his phenomenally coherent ad-libbing and open mindset, impressed by the way he saw through social poses and poseurs, shunned social spaces that placed a premium on mediocrity, undeserved success, sinecures, and not to forget, remained unimpressed by the cocky grins, platitudinous talk, clichés and mainstreamed ignorance borne of smug self-righteousness.

As I grew in years, like many others I found myself stunned by both his analytical sweep and sharp intellect, and realized that I was facing a very unique individual. I remember his discourses on the black rights movement in the United States even as he anatomized the author Shelby Steele's defence of Clarence Thomas's nomination by the Bush administration carried by the *TIME* magazine, or his delving into Raymond Aron's seminal book, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, and it hit me that Gaash was someone who had dared to plunge into rarefied intellectual atmospheres that would have choked other, lesser mortals or sent them to the no man's land of insanity. Emerging from it saw him totally Westernized in his outlook, his thought process painting a very wide canvas for his self to work on. Though Tariq Ali's views and polemics mirrored Gaash's own world view—which the latter once jokingly attributed to 'being students of the same school and having partaken from the same brook'—later, as I followed Tariq Ali's polemics and politics closely in the UK, I realized he lacked Gaash's philosophical thought, which endowed the latter with an astute grasp of prescient political dialectics.

But there was downside to his intellectual forays too. The mass of ignoramuses around him decried Gaash—whose unceasing analysis of self and everything around and their 'excess emotive identitarian baggage' irked them, appending the usual ignorant stereotypes, a mutinous Christian neo-convert with arcane knowledge, an atheistic boffin, a malcontent—to his name. What he could be accused of really was being ambivalent towards their prejudices and scrimmages, their political schisms and their stagnant cultural and literary mores.

An immature anti-intellectualism, borne of assumptions and primordial fears, pervaded the society, ensuring that these labels stuck. Although Gaash tried to deflect these accusations by trying to engage with the accusers, they did affect him. Though I never knew this till he died, the social and family pressures pushed Gaash to the edge so often that he even contemplated suicide if a certain threshold were to be crossed. To this end, he procured a firearm on one of his visits to Bombay. As the insurgency broke out, his friends in the know of this forcibly took the pistol from him and threw it into the river, lest it be found by troopers carrying out cordon and search operations, in which event Gaash's detention would have been a foregone conclusion. Given my own propensity to sit around at the shopfront at every given opportunity, it wasn't long before a multitude of

people made their way into my home to complain of my ‘wayward ways’ and Gaash’s ‘bad influence’ to my father.

IV

Gaash’s best time ended as the insurgency broke out. A haze of melancholy and malaise hung over much of the city, more particularly the downtown area, which was steeped in violence, pain and suffering. He was married now. This and the travails that any conflict engenders increased not only his worries of being subjected to bodily harm for his previous political affiliations but also threatened the joys of domestic bliss and expectant fatherhood. Financial insecurity also dogged him; the burning down of the Safa Kadal bridge in 1990 had whittled down the number of his customers and the uncertainty of violent outbreaks too played their part. He continued to run his shopfront, staying wisely private, employing subtle tones and avoiding new controversies. One of the images still etched in my memory is of a pheran-clad Gaash walking the Sekidafar Road carrying a marble cenotaph for his young brother-in-law, a militant who had been shot dead in an internecine clash, even after a truce had been called. I found Gaash his stoic self even that day. A few years later, his elder brother and two nephews died in a car crash; months later, Gaash still had that teary, unreflective-eyed look, a sure sign that these deaths were relentlessly preying on his mind.

V

In the meantime, I had joined medical school. Eventually, the discussions and discourses resumed and the shopfront bloomed again as if stardust had been sprinkled upon it by some fairy godmother. But these were stygian times of war, and all and sundry—even previous detractors stunned by the violence and dissolution of societal moorings because of the conflict—were making a beeline to join the shopfront crowd. Many a times on Gaash’s direction many of his friends and I would find ourselves engaging prospective aspirants to figure out if they made the grade or were incontrovertible time-wasters.

Then there were the many released pioneer militants from the locality who, Gaash confessed years later, did not want to be seen with him in public, but would furtively seek his counsel and help in an attempt to

understand what they had gone through or what was happening around them. Traumatized by their experiences in and out of jail, and notorious interrogation centres, this lot was finding it hard to pick up the pieces and start their lives afresh. Their persistent interest in and queries about the life and times of Regis Debray and Che Guevara left Gaash especially amused. It was after his death that I came to know that Gaash had been relentlessly approached to throw in his lot with the separatist political over-ground and contribute his opinions, but Gaash's self-counsel had seen him demur every time.

As for myself, I saw myself coming of age, at least intellectually. In the throes of the ongoing conflict, I discovered the relevance of Camus at that shopfront. The French philosopher's work became a catalyst for the evolution of a definitive understanding of the world around me. Gaash, like a conscientious teacher, ironed out my doubts and misreadings through his discourses. I fondly remember the time I began writing, and showed Gaash the handwritten draft of my first short story. He read and returned the manuscript, asking me to develop my own individual style rather than subconsciously mime my literary influences. 'If you want to be a writer you should learn something from Robert De Niro,' he said. 'What can a Hollywood actor inspire in me?' I asked, sitting at his shopfront. 'Well there are many actors, but there is only one Robert De Niro! He is his own man and he has his own style.' In hindsight I realized that this small conversation with him would guide all my writing attempts in the future and also be the source of my frustrating procrastination to go with it.

One day, I related snippets gleaned from Albert Camus's celebrated essay *The Rebel*—a book that he had passed on to me early on—which carried a scathing critique of communism within its pages, to Gaash. Reading it against the background of the dissolution of the USSR, I enquired as to how he had reconciled himself to the failure of Marxism. He smilingly replied that it was the communist State that had failed, not Marxism. He opined that western rather than eastern Europe had, although not out of good faith, gone on to become social democracies where the citizenry enjoyed social security, and free health and education, which came close to what Marx had envisaged without the repressive soul-crushing so common in the communist states. As an example of the inherent bad faith he reminded me how British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, had broken the back of British coal unions in the 1980s.

One day, as I watched him indulge in manual labour ferrying merchandise on his shoulders from the wholesalers to his outlet, I understood that what kept him going were his ideas and the social circle that understood him, which made up for what others thought was his lack of worldly achievement. I asked him once if not doing what would have suited his aptitude better—I thought he would have been well-suited to being a philosophy professor in a good institution—bothered him. He replied like a Zen master, saying that there were thousands out there in the world, like him, better than him, who also never made it. What did matter was the answer to the question whether he had lived in his mind enough to search and find that elusive spark, that particular thought that would spur ideations which would help the world take a step. What mattered was being part of an intelligentsia and producing something original, rather than rehashing the thoughts of others.

The years passed. One day in the summer of 2002, while in the middle of a discussion revolving around Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Gaash abruptly paused his discourse to talk about the futility of life. He confided that for many weeks, the thought of being at the end of road had overwhelmed him, leaving him tormented by questions of whether anything had been left unexplored beyond the frontiers of the mind he had already traversed. It was prescience than only a brilliant mind could possess.

A few days later, I noticed a mandibular swelling on Gaash. The sight was disturbing, but I reassured him and myself with a differential diagnosis of tuberculosis. The swelling turned out to be maxillary cancer. Even as he prepared for a trip to Mumbai for treatment, he pulled me aside and asked me in a hushed tone whether the surgical procedure would affect his mind and thought processes. This inquiry made me realize what the tough, self-understanding Gaash treasured the most, even in the morbid presence of his cancer: His mind.

The trip saw him confront his condition; the malignant mass was an aggressively inoperable one. Everything went downhill afterwards; the cancer medication eventually affected his spine, leaving him in the throes of pain. I realized he was enduring everything uncomplainingly, counting it as the cost of his will to live. 'I am trying hard to fight this cancer at the mental level,' he quipped once during one of his many radiotherapy treatments in the hospital where I worked as a resident.

Often bedridden due to diminished blood counts, he continued talking about things and ideas that fascinated him. One of his sisters, overcome with despair, sought the help of her neighbour, an octogenarian spiritual healer known to be aglow with mystical achievement. Gaash, not wanting to offend his sister, obliged. Ironically, instead of employing his healing powers, the spiritualist found himself engaged in a discussion on the concepts of super-consciousness and beyond, and the questions of creation versus evolution.

The spiritualist was also my father's friend. A few days later, I went to pick up my father after his weekly visit to the Khanqah-e-Mualla monastery. He stopped to say hello to the mystic, whose shop was nearby. The mystic remarked snappily that Gaash's generic queries were actually so loaded that answering them was useless. Though I didn't verbalize the thought, I speculated that the spiritualist—usually surrounded by an awed mass of people who lapped up his banal talk and ponderous metaphor-laden conversations—was irked by his lack of verbal and intellectual wherewithal to transubstantiate mystical perceptions into metaphysical terms that sounded satisfactorily coherent for someone of Gaash's calibre.

The last time I saw Gaash alive was in the hospital cancer ward. He had contracted severe pneumonia after his latest chemotherapy cycle. He didn't look like his usual fighting self, though he joked about having literally ended up in Solzhenitsyn's notoriously dissenting symbolic premise. Much as I wanted to stay, I was in a rush that day and left to attend a cousin's wedding.

I returned home the next day to the news that Gaash had died soon after I had taken his leave. He was just a few months shy of his fiftieth birthday. He had been buried that same evening. Ashraf, a mutual friend of ours, an overly religious schoolteacher who had endured a jail term in the aftermath of the 1987 election for being a Muslim United Front sympathizer, personally performed Gaash's funerary wash and led his requiem prayers. Many a moist-eyed friend and family member attended the wake. Several delivered heartfelt testimonials about Gaash's evolved character, his quest for knowledge and his living his life under the penumbra of being perpetually misunderstood. Some, after the wake, brought up Gaash's irreligiousness, agnosticism and communist past, questioning Ashraf as to whether his leading the wake and funeral prayers had been appropriate. To this query Ashraf, one of the many whose feelings for their late friend

oscillated between awe and sympathy, retorted by pointing out Gaash's innate religious convictions, which in his view many overtly religious people lacked. The reply was appropriate because even these detractors vouched for Gaash's honesty and truthfulness.

Epilogue

Given the recurrent disturbances of the last many years, a lot of books, columns and blogs signifying evolution in thought spheres came about. Venturing into any bookshop or cyberspace, one finds books and write-ups on Kashmir and Kashmiris by all and sundry, of both genders, natives and non-natives; some genuine, others employing neo-orientalist undertones, some over-exoticizing the place and people, others fervently commoditizing the conflict.

What I grasped while listening to Mr Shaw was enlightening in the sense that the intellectual sorts in Gaash's generation, with their resolutely inward focus, had self-realized. Their surreal journeys from varied Srinagar neighbourhoods to the seemingly foreign world of ideas and philosophy also saw them being averse to staking their hopes or claims of being the spine of their society's intellectual conscience. On the other hand, one can only surmise why they felt nothing even as they witnessed the mediocre privilege-seeking windbags, undeservedly successful pseudo-intellectuals and time-serving sybarites whose patronage made them claim so while representing the thoughts and feelings of none. Imagining Gaash and his type in such a social milieu, I could only imagine the extent to which their sensibility would have been stretched thin as they saw themselves pushed to the liminal margins, forcibly morphed into an intellectual manqué lot.

In mid-2014, at an art exhibition in New Delhi showcasing the works of an Australian modernist painter, an artist friend introduced me to a slim, baby-faced individual. In the brief tête-à-tête that followed, this chap bragged about his Kashmiri ancestry and claimed to have translated and published the works of a renowned Kashmiri mystic poetess into English. While I found the effort commendable, what irked me was the patronizing way he proceeded to recite the names of the native Kashmiri informants who had helped him in this twenty-year project. This made me curious and as I later trawled the Internet to look for this worthy's corpus of work, I came across his attempts at penning bizarrely ersatz poetry and B-grade

translations. That he had taken twenty years to accomplish the Kashmiri poetess project not only gave me an inkling of his IQ level but also made something else clear to me.

In the end, it was not Gaash's lot but these self-serving curators and purveyors of mediocre talents who continued to leave their pathologized markings on the Vale's intellectual domains for the future; a crowd of dinosaurs saddled with low self-esteem who were quite happy to be patronized as native informants. It wasn't a one-off instance. Their attitudinal descendants, having inherited their thin skins, trivial prejudices and stamp-sized canvases, were now coming to the fore.

What if Gaash and many others like him hadn't suffered censure and marginalization? Would Kashmiri society have achieved a higher qualitative edge with regard to its intellectual output? It is a counterfactual argument, I guess, that can only beget a sterile debate. One can only surmise that Gaash and many others like him had been born in the wrong place and at the wrong time and his efforts to imbue his shopfront with a 1950s Parisian coffee shop intellectualism meant little beyond the confines of his shop. Perhaps Gaash had realized this long before I did, but he never turned reclusive or indifferent to his intellectual quests. Through perseverance Gaash made sure that the shadow of abandonment would never hover over his posterity or what he had set out to do. He would remain, in posterity's gaze, a relentless man in search of himself no matter what the price. I am sure Gaash would have wanted no finer epitaph!

Stars of the Seventh Bridge

All that I know most surely about morality and obligations I owe it to football.

ALBERT CAMUS

CRICKET AS A game has never appealed to me, given the leisurely pace of the sport. The padding up required on the part of the players also implies the high risk of injury, adding to my apathy towards the game. Football being a contact sport carries its own hazards which unfortunately I came to realize only after I had incurred my own count of sprained ligaments and limb hairline fractures. No big fan of cricket, the sheer verve with which denizens of my area both followed and played it would often leave me baffled.

The cricket season would peak in winters, with football reserved for the summers. Every Sunday, scores of youngsters would make their way to play the game at the Eidgah, where groundsteams crisscrossed each other, pullulating the field all the time.

Fazil Kanth was a cricket star and a known face in Safa Kadal, someone who was held up as a role model and worshipped as a hero by aspiring cricketers. I made his acquaintance long after his glory days, when he had represented the state in the Ranji Trophy in the late 1960s.

Given Fazil's blue-green eyes, ruddy fair complexion, tall, tough build, and his characteristic sartorial sense (he preferred sky-blue jeans and designer camel-leather jackets), one always ran the risk of mistaking him for a Westerner.

A walking encyclopedia on cricket, Fazil's insight into the nuances of the game, as well as his knowledge of classic cricket encounters of the subcontinent and beyond, surpassed those of the most diehard fans of the

game, while his opinions about ongoing matches were much sought after. He was also very well-connected through his family, being the nephew of G.M Shah, the erstwhile chief minister and son-in-law of Sheikh Abdullah, but lacked both the airs and the misanthropic traits that many less evolved individuals would be prone to exhibit if proffered the same chance.

My first interaction with Fazil took place at Nazir Gaash's shop in the early 1990s. Settling into the chair next to him, my attention veered to the animated conversation that was underway—Fazil was narrating an anecdote from the days of his Ranji Trophy debut. What especially caught my interest were his reminiscences about Mansur Ali Khan, aka Tiger Pataudi, and his 'electrifying' presence on the field. He described Pataudi as a suave individual, but endowed with an aura so forbidding that it left both friends and foes on and off the field roundly intimidated.

In vivid detail, Fazil dwelt on the high level of discipline that Pataudi had instilled in his home side and how in spite of all the trappings of being born into much wealth and aristocracy—the customized PAT number plates of his three cars, the retinue of servants who carried his kit and helped him dress, and the unceasing supply of expensive cigarette tins that he always carried in his right hand—he never found it below his dignity to open his innings with a cricketing partner who happened to be the son of the groundsman at the stadium and whose means of conveyance was a brakeless cycle fit only for the junkyard. For this young, pimply nineteen-year-old cricketer from the Valley, who suffered a catch out at Tiger's hands, these traits of sportsmanship had turned the latter into an instant but profound inspiration for Fazil.

Fazil's own family connections would land him in a Jammu jail for a couple of months in the late eighties on trumped up charges of being a danger to public order, and stone pelting. His defence in the court, whenever he mentioned it, would make one chuckle. When the judge asked him how he would plead the charges, Fazil, forthright as ever, replied with his trademark deadpan facial expression that his biggest subversive act was being born into a certain family and as a certain person's nephew, in which he had been accorded no choice by providence in the first place. The judge threw out the case and Fazil returned home after nine months.

As a kid, though I was privy to the stories of zealous cricket fans smashing their transistors and TV sets every time their favourite teams lost, I would say that the time I was affected by the cricket fervour in my

surroundings was through the televised 1982–83 India-Pakistan series, being played in Pakistan. It was the first time I saw Imran Khan, with his matinee idol looks, and other big names like Zaheer Abbas and Muddasir Nazar in action, and got an idea that there was more to the hysterical following their play against India evoked. There was this identification of the local crowds with the Pakistan team, the reason I was never able to put my finger on.

The Safa Kadal population on both sides of the bridge felt they had a special connection to the Pakistani team in the form of the leader of their pace attack, Tahir Naqqash, whose father hailed from the Nalband Pora area across the Safa Kadal bridge, and where his extended family and uncles still lived.

My most enduring memory regarding cricket occurred during the controversial India–West Indies match in 1983, which was marred by sledging and violence directed at the Indian team at Srinagar's Amar Singh Club ground stadium. The overwhelming show of support for the visiting West Indian team by the local crowd was perhaps a way of showing the Indian team that they were not welcome in the Vale environs. The Imran Khan blowups carried by the spectators was a blatant exhibition of whose play they were rooting for.

Given the fact that it was a school holiday, I was watching the match on TV. As Greenidge or Richards—I am not sure which one—hit a six, the TV cameras veered to a spectator clambering over the fence, running across the length of the field to hug the cricketer, with one hand still clutching his tiffin. The cameras focused. He was a Safa Kadal lad I recognized, a shopkeeper by profession and though an ardent cricket fan, he himself had never ventured to explore any of the ends of a cricket field in his whole life.

It occurred to me much later that the spectators had placed the West Indians team's presence as a stand in for the Pakistan team, and as the former pummelled the Indian bowling line up, the spectators were vicariously celebrating the defeat of the Indian team.

This realization would consequently impel Sunil Gavaskar to expend a fair amount of pages to comment on the incidents of that day in his biography. Then there was the 1985 Prudential Cup, and the premature celebration of the Pakistan team's expected triumph in the finals turned sour as Ravi Shastri put paid to any hopes of such a possibility in the final match, taking home an Audi car for his efforts. The sullen faces and the

frayed tempers one encountered in the downtown by-lanes that afternoon perhaps summed up their ineffable sentiments of loss.

The Sharjah cup finals in 1986 and the six scored off the last ball by Pakistan's Javed Miandad would lead to frenzied celebrations in its aftermath, and a spurt in video rentals featuring the last overs. As electricity had been curtailed in the whole area that day, the palpable tension brewed up by the radio broadcast of the match hadn't been satisfactory enough, I suppose. Everyone needed to reprise it by watching the match again, rather than hearing or reading about it.

In contrast, the football scene was always less complex, a totally different ball game, so to say. Bereft of the wider political overtones associated with cricket, football had always been an attractive proposition for the many tough lads hailing from the downtown and city-side barrios, proffering an identity and ticket to local fame along with an avenue for employment in the government's departmental teams. For those who weren't lucky enough to land these placements, the ignominy of a hard life without the prospects of fame and prosperity waited to consume them eventually.

Perhaps this was the reason why the football scene, especially in downtown, was a vicious one. Though I was too young to witness its heydays, the football scene I came on to was far from convivial.

In the 1990s, though complicated to a large extent by the conflict in the background, the football scene was hopelessly divided as before between the orthodox-approach downtowners and the very aggressive but open-minded city-side lads who treated the former with derision on and off the field, for their supposed gaucheness. The orthodox play of the downtowners created too many defenders and defensive attitudes which, coupled with intra-team intrigues, marred the prospects of many downtown players and teams with the result that no downtown team ever passed the metaphorical glass ceiling beyond Nalamaar Road. With the advent of professional teams like that of the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), which were captained by the indomitable and technically brilliant scions of the soccer aristocracy like Sajid Dar, the best teams from downtown were prone to being played to the floor at the Dalgate barrier itself.

In Eidgah, many a knockout match and practice session culminated in scrimmages, which sometimes went too far because of fan hooliganism. But this was the 1990s, and football veterans increasingly felt frustrated in their

earnest attempts to revive the fortunes of the game under the uncertainty of circumstances that any raging political conflict breeds. Many known players were in jail, charged with subversion, and many had died fighting or through assassinations and in crossfire.

Given this scenario, many older star players believed that if the younger generation now coming to the fore were to suffer a blighting of their potentially brilliant careers, it would signal a death knell for the game.

The football scene hadn't always been so glum. Back in the seventies, many football players had earned a name for themselves within and outside the state. Many, like my coach Farooq Jan, were among the first players from the Vale to play for elite football clubs in Calcutta for big financial remunerations. Among the other names one recurrently heard were Ahmad Kumar, Zahoor Maidaen and Farooq Reshi, all legends in their own right.

Jan was an anachronism in many ways; a soft-spoken professional footballer from Safa Kadal who had once played for Mohammedan Sporting Calcutta. He seemed very far off from the downtown football scene, which was suffused with a propensity for blows and swear words at that time. In his late thirties when I came under his tutelage, I was considered lucky because there were few people he would agree to train. A highly skilled footballer, he was increasingly saddened by the flippant attitude towards the game that was gaining a foothold in many established as well as upcoming players, an observation that he voiced sparingly.

Even though he played to keep himself in form, he rarely interfered with the politics of the teams he played for. I guess his earlier achievements, along with the fact that he had rubbed shoulders with the best and the brightest in the game at home and elsewhere, had put him on a secure pedestal with regard to his self-esteem, which sadly I can't say for many others.

Many of the players were obsessed with their stamina level, leading them to run marathons from downtown to Shalimar Gardens every weekend to prove their fitness. Farooq had no such obsession. I did ask him though what had inspired him to develop his level of stamina. Jan answered with an anecdote. As a typical downtown teen, he had already realized his potential for football and went about developing the basic mortar for it. Jogging at full speed in Eidgah, he remembered being outrun by a much older individual, who proceeded to complete seven rounds to his three. Having finished his jog, the man then loaded a cigarette with hash and smoked it

before falling asleep then and there, amidst the background noise of stridulating insects inhabiting the nearby willow tree enclosure. ‘That druggie was my first inspiration, which drove me to work even harder,’ Jan told me.

On the dew-drenched grass field, lacing up our studded shoes on one bright sunny morning, Jan began to train me in right earnest. His aggressive forward position play—a rarity in these parts—necessitated a high level of competency and bodywork, which needed a fair amount of stamina to sustain. He was relentless and unforgiving in his emphasis on developing the speed, skill and strength required for the techniques he had mastered in his style of play which, to a novice like me, appeared overwhelmingly individualized inspirations drawn from European techniques. With the ambition of turning myself into an Alan Shearer clone, I imbibed whatever was being offered without minding the exhaustion and body aches, which came as the only price for the package.

Resentment, professional jealousy and refusal to be a seersucker sort in official environs have variously been posited as the reasons why Jan was never nominated to play internationally. But I never could discern any resentment in his voice as a consequence of having been treated unfairly. As Jan once put it to me succinctly, the respect of competitors and the din of thousands of spectators shouting out his name in ecstatic tones in Kolkata stadiums and elsewhere had emboldened and encouraged him enough not to take the ego trips of any pen-pushing bureaucrat working on the presumption of being an arbiter of his destiny, seriously. I believe excellence brings a sense of equanimity within individuals, and a profound sense of self-introspection about who they are or are not. But to get there, a certain level of sensitivity and a blasé attitude is a must.

For me though, while many of the players welcomed my presence, resentment from others, especially seniors who perhaps considered a lad from a different social background and profession with an innate aversion to obsequious attitudes a thorn in their side, made my progress frustrating and difficult at times. Realizing this, Jan introduced me to the State Road Transport Corporation player’s pool that played at Polo Ground. There I came across far senior players and coaches like Yusuf Dar, who had played at the Asian level and had a professional attitude towards the game. Later, injuries and overwhelming academic commitments eventually precluded the possibility of my pursuing football seriously to a higher level.

I have fond memories of this mid-1990 sporting period too, and some hilarious anecdotes that I treasure. The camaraderie that football offers along with its own world view is something that others can only wish for. I remember, as we played one morning, an old man was assaulted on the deserted road outside the field by his rivals with whom he was embroiled in a property dispute. In a split-second all the players interrupted their game, rushed out and thrashed the living daylights out of the attackers, while others took the bleeding and shocked old man to the hospital.

I also remember walking the road to a practice match one foggy morning with another player and bumping into an army patrol that, guns ready, was in the middle of raiding a house. Given our apparel perhaps, they just waved us on rather than detaining us for an identification parade. Many others among us though weren't so lucky. One day or the another we would hear the Army and the paramilitaries detaining and beating of one player or another, including many known names. Their sullen faces and painful gaits always reminding us what they must have gone through before being released.

On another day, a resentful player who, unable to find a placement in a practice match, agreed to be a goalkeeper, punched the ball shot at the goal post so hard in a fit of rage that he sustained an arm fracture. Finding nothing to use as a sling for his injured arm, a shoelace was utilized to do the job before sending him on his way to the hospital.

In a crucial match another of our players, Rahim Mattoo, an Eidgah lad, who for one reason or another always made it a point to communicate with me in his good-grasped English on and off the field, was tackled with a slide by his opposite, in a league match. Instead of getting up to resume his play, he slapped the tackler so hard as to leave him stunned and unable to get up, earning a red card for our worthy at a time when he was needed the most on the field.

Returning home from Ireland the last time in 2012, I happened to reconnect with many of the people with whom I had played, only to find many of the most promising talents wasted. One of them, exploited incessantly for his superb skills in matches, had never made it to any departmental teams as promised and now drives an autorickshaw. Another, younger player now drives a minibus, while another, a very promising lad, has given up football and is working contractually in some government

food and supplies department. Bad choices and naiveté perhaps, had done them in.

I would have persisted in my impression, if I hadn't run into my football coach Farooq Jan around the same time. In his telling, the face of football had changed considerably over the years. Many players from the Vale were reprising Jan's example, and had made it big in professional teams in Kolkata and elsewhere, so much so that the fears of yesteryears that had troubled many older players that football would die a slow agonizing death appeared unfounded in retrospect. He fondly talked of this new generation and their achievements with an immense sense of pride. I am not sure this would have been possible without many of these latest stars having had their imaginations stirred by the exploits and personas of veterans like Jan, unlike in other spheres of our society where a lack of icons has instilled an enduring frigidity in real and substantial achievement.

Nowadays he is busy training others to take over his mantle. But what I had gained from his coaching had left its mark on me; many years ago, playing on the football fields of Yorkshire, even as other football players commended my bodywork, I realized Farooq Jan's training had put me in real good stead. I did confess that to Jan with a sense of gratitude.

I then dwelt on how the other game that made Srinagar lads vent so much of passion was making any strides at all. The cricketing association though had been in the news for all the wrong reasons, with accusations of sleaze making headlines in local newspapers. But that wasn't something that bothered me. As for the city's cricket icons like, Fazil, who never gained anything monetarily from the game, died of lung cancer a couple of years ago. I am pretty sure somebody must have picked up his mantle. I heard that a tournament in his memory has been started in Srinagar. The latest exploits of the state's cricket players in the Ranji Trophy would surely have put a smile on his face.

Beyond the Vale at about the same time, Parvez Rasool's name was being bandied as the first Kashmiri to play international cricket as part of the Indian team. I found the downtowners thoroughly unimpressed. Many of the old timers smirked at what they thought was ignorance of the times past. The Safa Kadal shopkeeper who had climbed a fence to hug Gordon Greenidge in 1983, remarked wryly even as he hawked his wares on the shop. For him the crown of the first Kashmiri playing first-class international cricket would always adorn the youngish televised visage of

Tahir Naqqash so firmly memorialized in his mind. Did the answer surprise me? No, in downtown it wouldn’t surprise anyone at all.

Downtown Train

The country is destroyed; yet mountains and rivers remain.

RICHARD FLANEGAN, The Narrow Road to the Deep North

ROD STEWART'S PINING evocation of love and longing for a 'Brooklyn' girl in his *Downtown Train* single would set any pubescent boy's fancies aflutter. Back in the mid-1980s Stewart was a big name and a cultural icon. In my schoolboy imagination, Stewart's downtown was much akin to my hearth and home, with its own version of 'Brooklyn' girls in the age cohort I fitted in, but of course minus the underground trains, which in my case never existed beyond the grainy music video.

In those days, fancy hairstyles came of age, most of them overdone versions of Val Kilmer's Iceman do. Our school uniforms suffered reversible mutations every day, an outcome of efforts to turn our blue blazers and striped ties into fashion statements. Aghast, the school administration enforced crew cuts and confiscated fancy sneakers at morning assemblies as a punitive measure. The sight of other pupils attending class or roaming the playground barefoot served its purpose, till adolescent guile got better of the disciplinarians the other time. Watching *Perfect Strangers* on PTV and teen movies like *Tuff Turf* in local cinemas, and listening to the music of Springsteen, Van Halen and Culture Club informed and groomed much of my own supposed self-image.

There were many 'Brooklyn' girls, whose affections were actively sought or passively fancied. Some were part of the somewhat class conscious crowd, belonging to upmarket areas and schools, many of whom adored Tom Cruise—whose *Top Gun* was making waves—to the extent of pasting his photos in their notebooks. They crooned the lyrics of songs belted by Cyndi Lauper, Pat Benatar and the recent debutant, Madonna, and

wore jeans. A fluency in English, demonstrated similarity in taste in music and expensive jeans were a must to woo this class. Or so we thought, and acted upon.

Others, many of whom were strikingly beautiful teenagers, belonged to the not-so-upmarket crowd—the Brooklyn girls, as the song goes, waiting to get out.

Tamil slang has an apt word—kannil-kannil, or gaze-to-gaze—to denote our proclivities to indulge in puppy love. The matador minibuses which would ferry schoolgoers, regardless of their genders, were the petri dishes for our experimental forays. There would be scuffles over the drivers refusing to grant the 50 per cent students' concessions ordered by the government, but the drivers knew better to not cross our paths beyond. They knew once they crossed the downtown bridges after a scrimmage, it would pose insurmountable problems plying their trade, especially in those cheek-by-jowl neighbourhoods. They knew and we knew that a single shout or scuffle as we got down could arouse the parental instincts of shopkeepers, neighbours and passersby, who had watched you grow up playing hopscotch with their own children in those confusingly crocheted lanes and bylanes, and that could result in beating or broken windshields if things got out of hand.

These forays into puppy love many a time culminated in fights amongst the competitors, precipitated by outrage at what they considered the alienation of imagined affections for them after the object of desire had made her choice of someone else clear. Reprimands and slaps at the hands of family members of flustered girls, embarrassed by the obsessive compulsive traits exhibited by the Romeos, were routine and a bane for many an unfortunate individual. One interesting anecdote of this time concerns a friend, who was given a vicious dressing down by the elder sister of his co-ed school crush, a Hindu Khatri girl who lived a couple of hundred metres away from his Zaina Kadal home.

Our broken-hearted fellow, smitten by the girl and facing the fearful prospect of having his appalling behaviour reported to his parents, resorted to propitiating God and asking for some divine intervention through repeated prayers in a mosque to avert such an eventuality.

He, of course, had no inkling that his tormentor's umbrage had been thoroughly dissipated by her subsequent sighting of him entering the metaphorical protection afforded by the gates of his very well-known, old

money family home. Others, though, weren't so lucky and had to weather vicious beltings; lack of mettle to persevere usually forced them to give up on their beloveds with the hurt intonation of the banal 'love demands sacrifice' line.

Compared to my decade-older cousins, who were beyond the physically threatened adolescent phase and who had cut their teeth in tough situations, we were novices. These city-side relatives and their cohorts, perched on the balustrades of Gow Kadal bridge—many of them first-generation university students and professionals—their bikes on standby and knuckledusters in their pockets, indulged in far more serious stuff in the romance domain, going beyond eyeing the female crowds on their daily commute along the serpentine paths leading from homes to the colleges and offices in city centre.

The same Gow Kadal bridge would be the scene of a horrible massacre carried out by paramilitary soldiers a couple of years down the line, marking the beginning of the unceasing wave of war that engulfs the Vale even now, a quarter century later. One of the cousins who was attending to his wife who had just delivered a baby daughter too had drifted into the march with thousands of others, but had a miraculous escape after a close brush with death on the Gow Kadal Bridge.

Visiting my septuagenarian grandmother, who lived just half a furlong away from the bridge, after the incident, I could sense the profound outrage and grief in her voice, unusual for the stoic individual that she was, as she narrated the incident to me and other grandchildren, sitting in her garden on that sunlit winter afternoon. The conflict would claim or threaten lives in more than one way.

There was one chap, a slightly older playmate, who seemed immune to the boy–girl games of his neighbourhood age cohort. Ija, short for Ijaz, was a soft-spoken and mild mannered boy, who would be all smiles whilst the rest of us indulged in the affectations and chicanery necessitated by these ventures. A stand up guy, he stood beside one through thick and thin.

A very well-behaved boy and the second son of an artisan, Ijaz had suffered a twin hex early on in his life that had left him disadvantaged—he first lost his mother at an early age and then his chance at schooling when his father's efforts to make ends meet were defeated by the increasing demands that economic inflation imposed.

In the early 1970s, the Iranian carpet industry went through a slump in production because of child labour laws. As a result, carpets from the Vale, which were veritable Xeroxes of the Iranian designs, abruptly gained demand. While this boom created a class of carpet millionaires, it also diminished the prospects of scores of economically vulnerable kids like Ijaz who were forced to abandon their schoolbags and head for the drudgery of carpet looms to bring in the much needed supplementation of their family income. Put to work as an apprentice, a child labourer in a carpet-weaving enterprise, Ijaz, unlike his much-maligned and notorious co-worker class, lacked their trait of bad language, their vices and the blot of rumoured sexual profligacy, which made him a welcome presence as he sought a place in the educated schoolboy crowd.

My earliest memory of Ijaz is of a twelve-year-old who was part of the cricket team run, among others, by my younger sibling. A winter season cricket match in Eidgah had ended in a dispute and as everyone prepared to go home, the opposing team's captain uttered something offensive. Before anybody could react, Ijaz threw his pheran down and in a jiffy, the culprit was down on the ground, dazed, after sustaining a heavy header blow from Ijaz to his face.

It surprised many of us because Ijaz had never given the impression of being the combative or street fighter sort. Neither do I think that was his self-image. But his 'hard' head was legendary; it was known in adolescent circles that to get the better of Ijaz in a scuffle, one had to first somehow avoid his signature header blow. In the circle, he was closer to my younger brother and his lackeys than to me. Probably their bonding was born out of shared tastes for cricket, street food, loitering without intent and Hindi films, especially Mithun Chakraborty action flicks, which they relished watching and which I found hard to comprehend or relate to. On Eid days, we would all rush to the Mughal Gardens in our best apparel, our cameras loaded with Agfa or Konica film, to take our pictures by the fountains and the mountains. One could see even then that Ija placed a very low premium on sparkle, either in his looks or in what he wore.

Time passed by. My family moved houses and the academic burdens of high school served to loosen old bonds, and meeting up with the old circles became a rarity. I ran into Ijaz again in early 1989. I had just passed my matriculation exams. The downtown streets were afire with protests and stone-pelting in the wake of the *Satanic Verses* controversy. Stuck at a

relative's place, I hopped out to watch the brick-batting up close. Most of the stone-pelting protesters were from my age group, many of them known to me, Ijaz being one of them.

It had been raining and then a bright sunlight pervaded every nook and corner of the neighbourhood. Ijaz was there, his clothes and pheran awry and hands soiled with dirt. Unaware at the time what the protest was all about, I asked him what had brought on this latest conflagration. Call it innocence or naiveté, his answer was far from accurate; in his words he was protesting the inclusion of certain verses of the Quran in some book written by some infidel, Rushdie by name. I didn't proceed to put in my two bits of knowledge on the controversy. Whenever I ventured into the neighbourhood, we would bump into each other and exchange greetings on and off.

The following summer, 1990, with the war affecting every inhabitant of the Vale in one way or another, we met in the same locale. He seemed abnormally upbeat and confident. And then he disappeared. That was to be my last glimpse of Ijaz.

Many weeks later, in the same locality, I came across banners and posters commemorating the death of one Ijaz at the LoC. As I turned to a relative to ask who this chap was, it struck me, as he confirmed, that it was our own kid, Ija.

I remember meeting his elder brother at that juncture. Distraught and heartbroken at losing his sibling, he had just returned after burying Ijaz in some mountain village near the border. He went on to narrate a poignant story.

Ijaz had fervently wanted to join the insurgent ranks and, though dissuaded by his brother time and again with the plea to help him marry off their sisters first, he had eventually joined a group going across the LoC for arms training. Given the increased vigilance along the border, the group had to wait longer than usual in some dwelling up in the mountains where contaminated water made Ijaz sick. He insisted on crossing the border even though he was dehydrated and feverish, and the rest of the group had to eventually abandon Ijaz in the forest, after he could no longer keep pace with them on the arduous trek.

That was the last time he was seen alive, allegedly shot by a passing border guard patrol perhaps given his bullet riddled body, relegated by

destiny to be a statistic among the scores of lives the war has devoured across hamlets and cities in the Vale.

I came across Ijaz's brother again, some years ago. He was settled in life by then. The sisters too were married. I noticed the salt-and-pepper hair acquired by him and the striking facial resemblance to Ijaz, which wasn't apparent in earlier days, given Ijaz's stocky build compared to his sibling's lanky frame. Perhaps Ijaz, if he had survived, would have been the same—a family man, someone who would shake hands and like many others, regale friends and family with his own reminiscences of the old days—rather than existing only in some corner of our memories.

Coming back home that day, I pulled out an old album. Ija was in many of the old, crumpled photographs taken in mid-1987, with the city centre clock tower as background. Dressed in a white and red pullover and baggy trousers, Ija looked every bit the quintessential adolescent standing next to my younger sibling in the blindingly bright late summer Eid day, waiting patiently at the bus stand as the rest of us enacted hopping onto our own versions of *Downtown Train*.

Aquarius

Then came humans; they wanted to cling,
but there was nothing to cling to…

ALBERT CAMUS

FAYAZ SHEIKH LOOKS like someone who is close to beaten and older than his age. From the dimly lit, musty aluminium and steel utensil store in downtown's Darish Kadal area, the azadi and anti-India graffiti-covered shop shutters and brick wall enclosures of old style houses are eminently visible in the languid July afternoon sun. Tattily dressed, Fayaz is an emotionally reticent man with a slender frame and a stubble salted with white who has trouble remembering the year he was born. The school certificate presumably carrying his definitive year of birth was irretrievably lost when his cousin—either unknowing or unmindful of its import—dumped it on a heap of paper waste he had put to immolate. The two dates that come up in his mind are 1959 and 1961, which if true would, given his looks, prove my contention of his having aged before his time.

Not that the certificate's existence ever mattered; Fayaz dropped out of school early to dabble in various trades, finding his vocation variously as a novitiate calico printer, a crewel artisan, a tailor and a carpet weaver, until his weak eyesight forced his father to let him assist with sales in their crockery outlet across the bridge.

Being bespectacled, puny and unusually dark-complexioned earned him nicknames instead of the sporting laurels he so aspired for. He had been born in a tough neighbourhood where bullying—a fact of daily routines—made life hell for him. His weak physique precluded contact sports as an option, but he tried his hand at karate and for a while carried nunchakus to foster an image of a badass, but to no avail.

Fayaz had always nursed a soulful desire for aquatic jaunts and turquoise waters. The summers would find Fayaz plunging into the ubiquitous brooks and the placid cool spring waters in the area or loitering without intent on the sinuous waterfronts of the Jhelum, if not swimming in its waters.

His Aquarian streak also accounted for the many physical mishaps he came to endure. Fording the Jhelum River as a ten-year-old saw him entangled in its strong westbound currents, which pulled him down to its riverbed, nearly drowning him. He survived with great and exhausting effort. Another time a cousin almost died on his watch. While he was distracted and watching neighbourhood lads indulge in competitively gliding stones across the river surface, she wandered off and fell into the river. An elderly relative saw her in the nick of time and rescued her, roundly thrashing Fayaz for his negligence. On another occasion, his left leg started feeling numb when he, in his words, invited the curse of an elderly Kashmiri Pandit priest for disturbing a big shoal of fish feeding in a spring in the south of the Vale. The numbness increased after he accidently stepped on a water snake nestled in a gravel bed in the famed Aharbal Falls.

On the positive side, it was these forays and accidents that taught Fayaz how to navigate the wild natural waters. Over the years this knowledge propelled his efforts to harmonize himself with them and gain an insight into their connect with wider humanity.

‘If you meet someone spiritual, they will always remind you of that inherent bond that divinity and rivers share. It isn’t just a coincidence that waters sustain life, which after all is an attribute of divinity. Rivers make it incumbent on one to acknowledge their superiority as a primal, and should I say a driving force of nature. Once you show deference they will let you foray, swim and indulge. If you enter to conquer and pillage, you are foredoomed to being overwhelmed, deluged, swallowed or destroyed. In a nutshell, you need to respect the waters!’

I

For as long as the denizens of the Safa Kadal area can remember, Fayaz’s prissy-to-a-fault family, adept at earning plaudits from friends and foes alike for their airy noblesse oblige, made their living as provisions traders. In the politically charged atmosphere, they prided themselves on being

diehard followers of the Mirwaiz clan, whose seat of power rested in the Jamia Masjid area in the heart of downtown. The Mirwaiz family has always considered itself to be the rightful heir to the leadership of the Kashmiri Muslim community. The denizens of the localities surrounding the mosque have always acted as an organic whole; their efforts elevating the overwhelmingly institutionalized personal obeisance to this cleric's family to the level of virtue. Ever since they hosted Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah in the 1940s, they have obstinately treasured their self-image of being a diehard pro-Pakistan constituency.

In the late 1930s the newly minted Muslim—later National—Conference, raising the slogan of peasant empowerment, took up cudgels with the Mirwaiz's clan. They decried the cleric as an anachronistic self-serving prelate and an irrelevant protonotary for the Dogra monarch, and demonized both the office and person of their erstwhile patron—the incumbent Mirwaiz Yusuf Shah. The wider cadre and support base of the National Conference encompassed both rural and urban areas and echoed their sentimentality when it came to their own 'Great Leader' Sheikh Abdullah. The Muslim Conference thus succeeded in breaking the grip that the Mirwaiz had held over the populace and snared the honours of leading the anti-monarchical sentiment and discourse. Society, at least in Srinagar, found itself sundered along these political affiliations.

My own clan, avowed leftists, with their history of violence and warily suspicious of the Mirwaiz's activity in their area, found themselves detested by the latter's supporters after one of my granduncles stormed the Safa Kadal mosque and not only interrupted the Mirwaiz's sermon one Friday but then proceeded to raze the pulpit the sacerdotal eminence had been seated on. That the family also turned anti-National Conference in the coming years is another story.

This abiding rivalry between the Mirwaiz's followers and the National Conference, and the latter's rise to power in 1947, which manifested as a policy of hounding pro-Pakistan sympathizers post-1947, saw the patriarch Yusuf Shah forced into exile. His followers and idolizers, rudderless and pining for their exiled cleric, variously portrayed him as an embattled historical figure and a Kashmiri leader who never was. Over the decades, this perennial rivalry, now part of the old city's folklore, renewed its vigour post 1964 when the new Mirwaiz Molvi Muhammad Farooq came to the fore during the Moe-e-Muqaddas restoration agitation[*].

Post the 1975 Indira–Abdullah Accord,[**] the bakras[***] indulged in the politics of denunciation and arranged their narratives around the venality of their existential opponents, the National Conference, disparaging them as a comprador class, and the innate perfidy of the Indian state. In turn, National Conference leaders mocked the rank and file bakras as liegemen of emasculated political pretenders and their pro-Pakistan sentiment as hogwash, referring to their infamous inactions evident during the 1947 and 1965 Indo-Pakistan wars. Both times, the efforts of the bakras had failed to keep pace with their distinguishing pro-Pakistan sentiments, resulting in the failure of the Pakistani army's efforts to foment an armed insurrection against the Indian state. The bakras were said to have excused themselves of any attempts to lead the guerrillas to their targets, or provide logistical support or shelter them.

In 1977, when the local legislature elections were announced, the particularly vocal contrarian that he was, the incumbent Mirwaiz Moulvi Farooq projected himself as a political alternative to Sheikh Abdullah. In what his rivals considered a fickle and venal move, the Mirwaiz pitted himself against his traditional rivals to claim his own ascent to political power by ironically throwing his weight behind the Janata Party's desperate attempts to make inroads into the power corridors of the state and gain a permanent foothold in Vale politics. The election efforts saw the Mirwaiz hosting Morarji Desai, the then prime minister of India, at the Waiz clan's ancestral mansion in Razey Kadal in downtown Srinagar. The Mirwaiz's followers termed this a change of tactics and in accord with their political strategy.

Their rivals, who had just returned to power after spending more than twenty years in the doghouse, and given their history of violence, were in no mood to concede any of their opponents any quarter. The National Conference cadres initiated a vicious political pogrom, setting the old Srinagar city on fire. The vicious street wars overwhelmed the bakras, with a significant section of their populace suffering internal displacement. The strife undermined the social spirit of the old city, and vitiated bonds between neighbours and relatives. In the city-side, where Mir Waiz had no presence or support, the incumbent Indira Congress candidate, opposing the National Conference candidate Dr Jagat Mohini—who ran the popular Rattan Rani Hospital in the city-side area—was beaten to a pulp by

National Conference cadres even as she commenced speaking at her own public rally.

At this juncture, Fayaz, then a skinny teenager, accompanied his cousins, who were seconded to the Mirwaiz's election campaign, to south Kashmir, then considered the heartland of the National Conference support. This advance janissary guard secured the rally site and were then attacked by the National Conference party workers. Fayaz and the rest of the party workers stood their ground, putting their brick-batting skills to full use. The tear gas fired by the police to break the clash hung in the air for quite some time. When the Mirwaiz arrived, he climbed on to the podium and saluted their efforts, which in his words had made this rally in an opponent's den possible. Though the subsequent electoral failure brought both the Mirwaiz and his followers back to reality, Fayaz remembers this rally as the high point of his life, the realization of which always makes him cry out of pride.

Little did he know then that this inveterate affection for the Mirwaiz family would spawn some traumatic events and define much of his adult life.

II

Memoirist amnesia, faulty insights and the fallacious salting of recent historical narratives have led to the muddling of both the initial events marking the onset of the insurgency in Kashmir and the identities of its lead proponents. Attendant observers, though, peg the militancy's true beginnings to one mid-September night in 1988. The signal event heralding the insurgency saw its lead elements led on that fateful night by Aijaz Dar and consisting amongst them notably Maqbool Ilahi*. The group launched a swarming assault on the heavily fortified residence of the Deputy Inspector General of the Kashmir police. The botched raid ended abruptly and resulted in the death of Aijaz Dar.

This sprinkling of men from eclectic backgrounds included Ashraf Dar and Abdullah Bangroo, apart from Ilahi and Aijaz. They were in a way predestined to be the pioneering Kashmiri militant vanguard and lay the foundation of the insurgency. These lead proponents were the new breed of youngsters, coming of age in the 1980s, who increasingly viewed violence as the only instrument that could effect political progression in the Vale. Their profoundly grounded ethno-religious motivations saw the pro-India

political dispensations ruling the state as unrepresentative and forcibly inflicted on the local populace under the perpetual penumbra of violence. In their view, the indiscriminate use of force by the Indian state to muzzle dissent and inflict indelible humiliation through political disenfranchisement on the valleyites since 1947 stemmed from the variant, irreconcilable and mutually antagonistic confessional identities of the Indian state and the inhabitants of Kashmir.

In early 1988, seeking to end the monopoly of violence resting with the state's apparatus, Ilahi and his ilk sought to cross the LoC for arms training; it was this cohort that introduced Kalashnikovs to the Vale.** Ironically, this motley mix of individuals blazing across the LoC trails hailed from the Srinagar suburbs and rural areas, rather than the traditionally contrarian and anti-establishment strongholds of the old city or its upper city-side.

The then president of Pakistan, General Zia-ul-Haq, wanting to consign the 1972 Shimla Agreement to a heap of irrelevance, was already exploring ways of breaking the stifling calm and altering its skewed political status quo through fomenting an indigenous armed insurrection in the Vale. The group's advent in Pakistan was deemed highly propitious and of such consequence by its military establishment that General Zia personally welcomed and felicitated Ilahi and his mates when informed of the latter's arrival. Incidentally, if we are to listen to the people who came into contact with these pioneers, the group's stay in Pakistan saw many of them making forays into the Afghan theatre of operation against the retreating Soviet Red Army. In April 1988, ensconced in a safe house in Rawalpindi, Ilahi and others serendipitously survived the Ojhri* ordnance camp disaster and witnessed its aftermath firsthand. From an insular homeland and attitudes the men of this pioneer group were thrust into witnessing the frontlines of the Cold War in the volatile neighbourhood first hand. This would definitely have had an effect of transmuting their views of self, world and their mental canvas as a whole.

This pilot group had set a precedent; their absolutist rejectionist underground politics had captured the imagination of much of the Vale's disgruntled youngsters, who would follow in their stead. Many of these pioneering militants, whose political inclinations were shaped by the Jamaat Islami ideology—including Ashraf Dar and the publicity-shy Ilahi—went on to lay the foundations of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, the largest and the most powerful tanzeem involved in the violent insurrection. But within the

city it would be the JKLF, led by a tough city-side lad, Ashfaq Majid—who unlike the former had cut his political teeth as a member of Shakeel Bakshi's Islamic Students League, part of the second wave of recruits venturing across the border in the late summer of 1988—that would act as a recruiting pivot. Given that JKLF was Srinagar-based, its cadres was able to successfully imbricate and draw upon the city's local, familial and student fraternity networks. Their acquainted friendlies, their friend's circle and acquaintances who knew them before these lads marched their steps into insurgency domains, their fervent eulogies and not to forget the widespread police posters advertising Ashfaq's cohort as fugitives saw them as well as their manifestoes gain publicity and acceptance in a very short span of time, unlike the countryside-based Hizb-ul-Mujahideen who had had no such luck and were still recovering from the near-successful crackdown that saw them push deeper underground.

By early 1989, the downtown as well as the city-side belt grapevine at the subterranean level was abuzz with the furtive arrivals and departures of the scores of neighbourhood boys venturing across the LoC for arms training. Most of them, returning with shipments of rapid-fire Warsaw Pact automatic weapons and explosives, laid low, biding their time till their numbers and arms dumps multiplied exponentially enough to sound a full-fledged call to arms, that would see them ignite a full-blown successful guerrilla war. The arsenals of Kalashnikovs and RPK machine guns seized from those arrested baffled the local police officials, whose own arms training hadn't graduated beyond mastering the antediluvian World War vintage British Enfield .303s.

Ilahi went down fighting; so did Ashraf, Ashfaq and many others in the coming years. The few survivors in their pioneer cohort renounced both gun and politics, reverting to humdrum lives after serving stiff jail sentences, others joined the separatist overground polity.

III

The vernal solstice of 1989, the year preceding the insurgency, would make its mark as being unusually violent. This time even Srinagar's upper city-side, hitherto considered less volatile than the downtown area, exploded in intractable violence, lasting days. Scores of demonstrators were shot dead in violent confrontations with the police. My maternal grandfather had

passed away and along with the rest of my extended family, I was located for a week in Mandar Bagh—a relatively quiet suburb straddling the tough neighbourhoods of Maisuma and Basant Bagh—for the wake and requiem rituals.

These areas had increasingly been on tenterhooks since the year before when many demonstrators protesting the supply of fungus-ridden wheat and increased electricity tariffs had been shot and killed by trigger-happy policemen. On an exceedingly bright and cool spring afternoon the sounds of bullets and slogans rent the tear-gas-filled air, heralding the rioting by the lads from these neighbourhoods.

Given their propensity for violence—which in the past had created many a street-fighting legend and tough reputation for their areas—it surprised no one that the rioters destroyed liquor shops and overturned police vehicles in their area, taking anti-state violence to a lethal level not imagined by their downtown comrades. I watched in trepidation as the young wife of my elder cousin's childhood buddy came running, dishevelled and barefoot, into our maternal-side home; her husband had been shot by the police while pelting stones in the Basant Bagh area. I still remember my cousin, a recent medical school graduate, leaving his bereaved household and rushing to the hospital through the twisting by-lanes littered with stones, discarded tear-gas shells and shards of glass, to be at the bedside of his childhood playmate.

Two boys whom I knew by face were among the many dead in the conflagration. One was Ashique, a much-tormented twenty-something youngster with recurrent confinements to his credit for being affiliated with a nascent Islamic students league party. The previous year Ashique's name, face and standing-up for others propensity had gained recognition in the Gaw Kadal area when he had helped out a posse of the local city-side gang while still lodged as a political detainee in the Kothi Bagh sub-jail. These gangsters had been detained on the charges of a knife and knuckleduster assault in the suburban Broadway cinema during the opening show of the Aamir Khan-starrer *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak,* which left many black marketeers badly injured. The gang members had then forced their way into the cinema hall and were watching the film when the police raided the precincts and arrested them.

As they hadn't been subjected to a thorough body search, they were still carrying their blades on their arrival at the Kothi Bagh sub-jail. Many of

these boys were Ashique's neighbours and he listened intently as they blurted out their predicament, which could have led to stiff jail sentences for them. Given his resourceful nature, Ashique used his contacts to get the knives and knuckledusters stealthily removed from their persons before they were discovered by the jail staff. But for him personally, his luck would run out a few months later.

In the lull between the stone-pelting that spring afternoon, Ashique ventured for a stroll outside his Maisuma home and had ostensibly stopped to shake hands with an on-duty police official whom he had befriended during his incarceration. Even as he crossed the road, a hand grenade targeting the policeman exploded near them, killing Ashique on the spot and badly injuring the officer.

The other boy whom I recognized was Sajid, a passionate cricketer from the Tanki Pora area. He had been hit in the head by a police bullet as he fled an enraged police posse near the Gow Kadal mini-bus stand. Rumours abounded that he was a spotter for a grenade thrower and was trying to extricate himself after a failed attempt to target the policemen.

In the downtown Buhyr Kadal area, two masked men appeared from the by-lanes and fired their AK-47s indiscriminately at a police column that was warning stone-pelters to disperse or risk being shot. Ill-prepared and ill-armed with antiquated weapons, the policemen fled the scene. The masked gunmen, though, were carried on the shoulders of a crowd of adulating demonstrators and showered with confectionary by elated citizenry who had long chafed under the oppressive night raids and arrests.

IV

Twenty-fifth August 1989 was an unusually sultry Friday. That broiling and dusty day found Fayaz Sheikh sprawled out like a dot in the vast inner lawns of the centuries-old Jamia mosque. Savouring the shade that the diagonal shadows of the mosque's pagoda spires proffered, he watched as scores of pigeons hastily pecked on the corn and rice sprinkled around.

The only dampener was that he wasn't himself that day. His crush on a medical school student from the Zaina Kadal area had come to naught, leaving him heartbroken. The vocal rebuke and social ridicule that he had had to endure after the girl publicly berated him at his shop for writing love letters had accentuated his grief, leaving him in the throes of despair. It

seemed as if someone had scrawled the word ‘loser’ on his visage for all to see.

That Friday he had arrived early for the mandatory prayers at the Jamia mosque. Beyond the sanctum sanctorum, comfortably perched in the lawns, he lent his ears as always to the ubiquitous orations of conspiracy theories and political polemics peddled by the earnest-sounding young men who, like him, were diehard Mirwaiz followers.

Times were changing. Given his limited electoral success, the incumbent Mirwaiz Farooq had considerably increased his orotund criticism of the government of the day, led by the then chief minister, Farooq Abdullah. But in what could be considered a break from the past, he also found himself increasingly hemmed in and hamstrung by the aggressive streaks of his younger followers who had of late appeared increasingly absolutist and less enchanted with both his homiletic preaching and the political alliances he always seemed to be contriving to mount a challenge to the mainstream political status quo.

According to Fayaz’s recall, earlier that year in July, as the Muslim world mourned Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, a masked worshipper interrupted the Mirwaiz’s weekly liturgical mass and took offence to the presence of the mainstream politician Rashid Kabuli on the Jamia pedestal. A one-time political ally of the Mirwaiz, Kabuli’s propensity for gratifying his political ambitions and whims had seen him adopt and discard innumerable political ideologies. His chequered and unfruitful political postures saw him morphing from a one-time secession-seeking firebrand to a tamed, power hungry wannabe in the process. The masked protestor physically prevented Kabuli from speaking and instead chose to himself talk of the virtues of the absolutist rejectionist politics taking hold in the younger, charged-up crowd.

On that sultry August day, during the pre-prayer banter, Fayaz sat bolt upright listening to the animated conversations elucidating the excursions of aspiring insurgents to and from the guerrilla training camps in Pakistan. His curiosity was even more piqued when one of the lads narrating the anecdotes produced Pakistani currency notes from his pocket, passing them around as mementoes, or rather proof, of his proximity to the elusive militant returnees. The discussions were peppered with predictions of a full-fledged war against the Indian state set to commence in future months. Fayaz felt the defiant bravado within himself and others, even as mention of

the inevitable fighting and the taking on of the armed might of the Indian state seeped into their conversations. Much of this could be ascribed to the overidentification of these boys with the exploits of a local lad who had become a name to contend with in the insurgent echelons—Mushtaq Zargar, alias Latram.

Zargar, borne into a family of coppersmiths who, much like Fayaz's family, were hardcore Mirwaiz supporters, had been a utensil-maker in his previous avatar. Over the years, tumultuous political upheavals had seen many youngsters, among them Zargar, increasingly give vent to their resentment towards the ruling class, who in their view were compradors representing Indian overlordship, by indulging in stone-pelting on Fridays. This had become a favourite pastime among the lads, who had honed their brick-batting skills to the level of an art. Joining in were many youngsters whose political ideations were still congealing. The brick-batting and demonstrations of street power had earned the area the sobriquet of 'Palestine'. These contrarian proclivities and their ramifications in the form of violent street protests by his followers were deemed by his torpid ruling class opponents as the Mirwaiz's means of being heard. The violence was a headache for the policemen, who for years had faced the ire of demonstrators like Zargar and many other boys who had cut their teeth in street demonstrations and went on to become part of the second wave of volunteers stealthily crossing the LoC for arms training at the end of 1988.

Zargar returned to the Vale in early 1989. The next few months saw his stock skyrocket, particularly after an ambush on the eve of Eid on Nala Maar road—a furlong away from the Jamia mosque—that left many paramilitary men dead in its wake. Many bystanders including Gujjar shepherds selling their produce for the Eid-ul-Adha festival were allegedly shot dead by the troopers, enraged by the sight of their fallen and injured comrades.

Previously, in an effort to stem the intensity of the protests, the police had increasingly resorted to midnight knocks and arbitrary arrests, which had never been more frequent compared to previous years. But this time the frisson created by the stashing of weapons in neighbourhood attics and courtyards by childhood friends and acquaintances returning from training camps congealed into a confidence that percolated to fuel an increasingly militant backlash on the streets, with arrested and harassed young men increasingly seething with revenge. For these lads, Zargar embodied the

challenge to the state's monopoly of violence and in downtown barrios he was viewed increasingly as a role model whose emulation would turn a new leaf in the long simmering resentment against Indian sovereignty over Kashmir.

The first step was undermining and upending the venal self-interest-driven ruling class, the National Conference, and other pro-India politicos who, along with their bow and scrape supporters—actually little more than a bunch of political gangsters—were thoroughly despised. This thraldom for Zargar in particular and the nascent insurgency in general ensured that the lads would follow in Zargar's steps sooner rather than later. The steady wave of recruits swelled the ranks of Zargar's faction within the JKLF, so much so that only a few months on, he felt confident enough to start his own independent tanzeem. His fiercely pro-Pakistan Al Umar Mujahideen would in time become an intimidating insurgent power to contend with in the downtown Srinagar area that took the Indian army and paramilitary forces years of sustained counter-insurgency operations to neutralize. The coming times would also find Zargar consigned to prison, with scores of his commanders and foot soldiers dead, before his release was secured as part of the Indian Airlines 814 hijack hostage exchange deal at Kandahar Airport in 1999.*

Thinking back to that Friday, 25 August, Fayaz remembered feeling elated at possessing and pocketing the Pakistani currency note even as he continued nibbling the mutton kebab lunch he carried. A foreboding feeling of looming trouble lurking in the environs of the mosque gripped him at this juncture. He felt an odd shudder, which led him to think that he ought to leave the mosque as soon as possible. But given his state of mind, which was addled by humiliation and unrequited love, he chose to stay rather than heed his prescient sense. Even as the prayers finished and the Mirwaiz Maulana Farooq left the premises, the mosque was cordoned off by paramilitary troops and the local police hemmed the remaining worshippers in. The state-owned TV and radio that evening reported that the police and paramilitary had launched an operation after actionable information regarding the presence of armed insurgents being present in the congregation was received, but according to Fayaz and other eyewitnesses there were none present that particular day.

The enraged paramilitary soldiers, mostly drawn from mainland Indian plains, were especially furious and were heard cursing the deceased

Pakistani dictator Zia-ul-Haq—who had died in an air crash a year prior—with the choicest of expletives, along with the elusive insurgent Mushtaq Latram.

They herded the mass of men filing out of the mosque into the waiting police trucks and onward to detention centres. Fayaz felt a punch on his forehead and a kick on his butt before he found himself squeezed into the police vehicle. As the vehicles took the men to the various detention centres in the city, Fayaz remembered the Pakistani currency note in his pocket, and stealthily tore it to bits. The Kothi Bagh sub-jail in the heart of the city was brimming with fellow detainees, so Fayaz's group was diverted to the Sher Garhi jail some distance away from the city centre. He was detained for a week before being released without charge.

He couldn't discern that this ordeal was a sign of the future times, when thousands were destined to be detained and subjected to mind-numbing violence. The sullen faces and pessimistic glances of families accepting the fates of their wards and relatives as some constant element that couldn't be wished away was just the beginning. Fayaz was among the luckier ones.

V

One of my own memories is related to an incident that occurred three weeks after Fayaz had been released. I clearly remember the sign at the entrance of the police station—read the anodyne HATE THE CRIME NOT THE CRIMINAL—as two of my friends and I were marched in. As a pimply teen who had just joined high school, I had found myself detained after inadvertently walking into street fight that was being broken up by police at the city centre. We were herded into the office of the station house officer (SHO)—ironically a post held by my maternal grandfather back in the 1930s. He was a portly, ursine-faced, middle-aged man, who sat drumming his fingers on the table. His apish demeanour, repugnant facies and accusatory gaze signified his aversion to any intelligent conversation or meaningful explanations. I escaped with a reprimand and a dressing down after being accused of tarnishing my father's reputation. I gauged it clearly, that something was very very rotten in the place I had been born around, even as he spared me, and stood up to threaten and beat up my best friend. It would take a very sick mind to belt a skinny, smooth-talking, hopelessly romantic teen like Tufail Wani—technically a minor and still carrying his

schoolbooks—to force him to confess to being a saboteurand and repeatedly threaten him with a long jail term outside the state. A college gangster who had been jailed for beating a policeman senseless was brought in to identify a connection. There was none, he was only too happy to declare to our relief.

But contrary to my expectations, we weren't just allowed to leave, as my other friend, on seeing that I had escaped a thrashing because of my family name, stupidly bragged about being a scion of a family of wealthy carpet dealers. This delayed our release as his guardians vainly argued with the vulpine-minded SHO, totally unimpressed by their flaunting their connections with senior police officers.

I felt an illicit thrill as we were herded into a dark cell, which reeked of urine stench and whose solitary inmate was being held for driving under influence, to wait for our guardians to claim us. Snitches masquerading as prisoners, and full of goofy epigrams and wisecracks, approached the cell; I remember this buffoonish one-eyed man, who promised to dispose of the knuckledusters we were supposed to be carrying—we weren't—lecture us on the magnanimity of the SHO.

My impatience dissipated as I saw dozens of people assemble for the afternoon prayers in the jail courtyard. We were let out for the prayers, which were surprisingly led by a Bengali imam. In the courtyard, unaware of their circumstances, I sat amongst the prisoners trying to figure out what they were in for. It was a motley group ranging from children and bumfluff-sporting teens to stoic middle-aged men trying to forget themselves in prayers.

A memory that is still etched in my mind with astounding clarity is of the faces of the queuing family members carrying tiffins. I came across an old woman and a young woman, who I correctly presumed to be her daughter, huddled on the concrete floor with a benign laid-back middle-aged man and a young ten-year-old boy. To my horror it turned out that both individuals were the sons of the women, respectively. In my adolescent innocence I asked the man what he was in for. I remember he answered with a cynical smile, 'for offering prayers'. I saw other detainees frown in sympathy at his declamation. It turned out that the man's nephew had come over to their home and insisted on accompanying his maternal uncle to the prayers at the Jamia mosque and like the rest of the congregation enmasse both had ended up in prison enmasse. Given the fact that I wasn't

conditioned to the sights of multiple tragedies befalling a single family and secondly, having a fair idea of conservative social mores of the urban Kashmiri society, the indignity of these conservative women having to stand in a police station, a place known for their sordid reputations in the public perception, would have been very soul wrenching for them, to say the least.

As for the Bengali imam, he had been travelling from his native West Bengal and had found himself responding to the call for Friday prayers at the Jamia mosque. Little did he know that this was a misstep that would suck him into being victim of a crisis he had no understanding or participatory urges of. He was especially tearful, trying to rationalize his incarceration as God's will. The others had resigned themselves to their fate.

We were eventually released. The next day we returned to the station to collect our schoolbooks and copies. The jail was empty. Even as the SHO complimented Tufail's drawing skills and handwriting, a lawyer entered, identifying himself as part of the legal team that the then Mirwaiz Maulana Farooq had hired to challenge the arbitrary detention of the worshippers; many of the prisoners had been relocated to jails outside the Vale without a fair trial. The patronizing officer stated he was unable to comment on the sub-judice affair while the lawyer ended his argument with a lament disguised figuratively in the renowned poet Iqbal's couplet about good and evil. Years later I surmised that the mass arrest was a way the powers that be ruling the state at that time were sending a message to the Mir Waiz Maulana Farooq that he was irrelevant in the power games at play and bringing in to naught his efforts to seek release of these men was a way of bringing his stock down within his own lobby.

As we left the police station premises, I wondered how any ruling class could be so insensitive to the suffering of their own people and acquiesce in the brutalizing of citizens without any guilt being proven. That night I put this question to my father and his answer was terse. It had always been so. In his youth my father had witnessed in almost every locality of Srinagar this miserable political worker belonging to Plebiscite Front, disembarking from police trucks, holdalls and all, after being released from jail through acts of showy philanthropy by the then rulers on the eve of Eid. Given the fact that these were from mostly working class, losing out on their work and wages, saw them adding to the burden of impoverished families. 'These

workers, were the supporters of Sheikh Abdullah, the National Conference supremo; and now in a vivid instance of historical irony, his son is overseeing the same repressive measures. The arbitary arrests, beatings and violence and co-option schemes were presumably happening under his watch and full knowledge. In time you will see a lot of cruelties, but then time also will make you look over this perpetual cycle of suffocating political instability, violence and its cruel ramifications on the society around, and force you to get on with your life,' my father remarked pensively.

Given my caramelized view of life and the wider world at that time, resplendent with notions of living some western high school teenagers life marked by rock and roll music, American serials, music videos, branded apparel and belief in my own 'pursuit of happiness' the environs felt like a leaf out of Soviet totalitarianism, the kind that the then US President Ronald Reagan constantly inveighed against on television as an Evil Empire, which the forces of civilization were set against to defeat.

A few days later, I came across my cousin Tariq Mir, a decade and a half senior to me, a very street-smart guy whose temperamental behaviour saw people around cowering with fear every time he walked the street. He listened intently to my goofing up like I had, reminding me that our sorts weren't meant to be in lock ups because it meant smudging our social register placements. But then, the worldly sort that he still is, narrated how few months before leading a hunger strike outside the government secretariat while demanding jobs for unemployed engineers like him, he too had ended up in a police lock-up with the rest of his colleagues after being soundly thrashed by the police truncheons. There were lads with him who wept like women while he kept a brave face, he said because there was no option but being thrust in a lockup for demanding what you think is your right. He with all his toughness had found it very insulting to anyone's dignity. 'What is anyone's worth minus his dignity?' he asked. Zilch, 'he proclaimed before I could answer.'

Summing up his and my experiences, I realized that those who ruled others had to harbour a certain condescension, a detestation for the people they ruled, in order to let things come to this pass or turn a blind eye. It dawned on me decades later that finding a sensitive politician with an innate sense of justice and empathy for his own people is as easy to find as a virgin in a maternity ward.

Driving through the city centre a few days later with my latest date in tow I came across the SHO again. Unbeknownst to me, The Coffee Shop, that for years had been a preferred haunt for the city's intellectuals and sophists, had been ripped apart by a bomb earlier that day. As I reached the iconic Mir Pan House in the Regal Square, I realized that I had stumbled into the explosion's aftermath, and found myself trying hard to calm a panicked and hysterical girlfriend who felt intimidated by the crowds and scores of policemen.

I caught a momentary glimpse of the SHO. He was frothing at the mouth, ashen-faced, inspecting the wreckage of the coffee shop, the swagger that I had encountered in his office gone. The wanted men of the fledgling underground whose faces adorned the wanted poster board at the police station had struck again. I, like many denizens of Srinagar, having seen the disturbances, arrests and police high-handedness in downtown, knew in our hearts that their chickens had come home to roost. The state-owned coffee shop was empty in the mornings, there were no injuries or deaths, but the blast was the insurgents tacitly demonstrating that their reach was well into the main city centre of Srinagar. It was one of the many events that heralded the war. A few weeks later, the Kashmir police saw its first fatality occur even as the SHO of Maisuma, an area that had become a hotbed of militant symbolism and recruitment, was shot dead during an early morning stroll on one of its main thoroughfares. The locality's population distributed sweets celebrating the killing. Many a police officers considered overzealous/repressive were targeted all over Srinagar, but the insurgents mostly shot them in the limbs. These shootings termed 'leg-shot' in local parlance was kind of an equivalent to the Irish 'kneecappings'; a violent warning to back off.

VI

The hitherto subterranean insurgency picked up steam in the following months and stepped up full throttle, crossing its Rubicon with the kidnapping of Rubaiya Sayeed, the daughter of the newly appointed home minister of India. Fayaz was in the old city's Buhyr Kadal area when thousands of revellers converged to celebrate the release of four incarcerated militants in return for her release one cold December evening.

In the fresh flush of euphoria in its wake, thousands of boys from downtown and the countryside made a dash across the LoC to train in arms. Trekking shoes rapidly disappeared from market shelves because of the increased demand. Even as AK-47-wielding urban insurgents made their presence known in free-for-all shootouts and acts of sabotage, the state machinery keeled over.

Even the normal civil populace felt exasperated and elated at the way a small militarized section of the society had effectively staged a coup d'état on the pro-India dispensation, causing their Shangri-La of infantile politics and kleptocratic patronage systems to crash down like a house of cards, sending their players scurrying for safety. The civilian populace had long chafed under the misrule of the ruling class and what they saw as Indian state's arrogant lording over, and having witnessed that their endless demonstrations and the young cohorts stone pelting hadn't achieved anything ever were totally exasperated at what a few men with guns achieved in a few days time. Since the insurgents at that time only primarily targeted the Indian armed forces, kept away from civilians and even targeting run of the mill local policemen created a favourable impression on the populace who now were more than willing to harbour them or suffer atrocities at the hands of the state organs for what they saw as a higher calling, the quest for liberation.

The erstwhile economic, political and social bigwigs welded into their pro-Indian political party nomenklatura aroused considerable suspicion in the insurgent groups. This plutocracy was ill-prepared to fight the irrelevance they were descending into even as they stared at its abyss. Some among them donned new veneers, reinventing themselves to venture into a sort of a muggy intimacy with the new powers emerging from the streets while others fled, unable to reconcile their non-decisions, conspired circumstances and inchoate ambitions with the changed times. three weeks into January, as Jagmohan assumed the office of Governor, shootouts and massacres made their debut and the situation spiralled out of control.

Not much was heard from the contrarian side like the incumbent Mirwaiz Farooq himself. One can only surmise what his state of mind was in a situation that was so politically odious. For the militants the relevance of politics was over, it was the gun that would carry the day forward and a full-fledged guerrilla war that would be an arbitrator of Kashmir's future.

The malignant menace of guns, which empowered only their wielders, surely relegated his presence from overarching to merely passively symbolic. Any display of rhetorical nonproximity, over-ambitious claims, momentary fame, strength or vexation by anyone meant putting oneself in jeopardy.

In the coming years this cycle would perpetuate and repeat itself. Scores of political workers and politicians, negotiators, go-betweens, loud-mouths, braggarts, innocents, benign sorts, malignant one's, had already been or were destined to be killed for displaying any temerity that put them at the risk of being put in their crosshairs by, the militants and then what came to be known as unidentified gunmen, who could have been working for anyone and any side. Bodies would turn up on the streets, with nobody taking responsibility for their killings.

Fayaz chose to be a bystander; his physique and poor eyesight precluded any serious treks across the LoC and martial ventures. On a sunny winter morning he found himself in Eidgah attending a rally at the newly built martyrs' graveyard, a pre-planned event that saw hundreds and thousands of people converging from towns and villages all over the Vale to march on to the United Nations Military Observers Group in India and Pakistan office in Srinagar to present memoranda for Kashmiri freedom and self-determination as envisaged in UN resolutions. On the hastily prepared dais, masked gunmen in pherans talked of the necessity of guns for gaining freedom, even as they pulled up their pherans to exhibit the sleek new guns hung across their chests. Fayaz asked a fellow rally attender if the guns in the hands of these men were Kalashnikovs. The fellow nodded his head in acquiescence. It was a big rally; azaadi seemed to be around the corner.

VII

Early on the morning of 21 May 1990, two or three unidentified people entered the home of Mirwaiz Farooq masquerading as visitors. Within moments shots rang out. The gunmen fled, leaving the cleric behind in a pool of blood. The news of the shooting spread through downtown like wildfire, paralysing life. Many people had surmised that the Mirwaiz could be under threat, given his popularity and solid constituency backing, which was the envy of many politicians. He had ostensibly refused offers of protection; Indian paramilitary men or a police guard would have seen him

bracketed into a certain, pro-India politician category, and given the very pro-Pakistan sentiment that his followers harboured, one that he was loath to be identified with, perhaps. Everyone knew though that his tilt to any side could have turned the tables on many a grandiose game being played out by sub-continental rivals in Kashmir.

Governor Jagmohan's administration and much of the Delhi media pinned the blame of the Mirwaiz Farooq's assassination on Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, the largest militant tanzeem operating in much of the Vale's countryside. Subscribers to this view in Srinagar city's overly imaginative bazaar grapevine—mostly long-time detractors of the cleric—saw the act as a step towards political hegemony by the Hizb militants, who wanted to clear the board and turn it monolithic with members of their parent organization, Jamaat–i-Islami, ensconced in the leadership saddle and firmly calling the shots. For these detractors and the militants, the Vale's mainstreamed religio-ethnic confessional politics had been watered down, misrepresented and exploited by the likes of the late Mirwaiz for his own ends. Others, mostly the Mirwaiz's supporters, saw it as the handiwork of Indian intelligence agencies seeking to drive a wedge between Kashmiri tanzeems and open the floodgates for a civil war. Other more imaginative old-timers traced the assassination back to events in 1965. They saw the killing as a payback extracted by Pakistani generals for the Mirwaiz's refusal to fully act out their establishment's bidding in the wake of Operation Gibraltar in 1965. Their anecdotes were full of opinions about little-known things like the Mirwaiz's recalcitrance being one of the factors that saw not only Operation Gibraltar fail but also put in jeopardy the lives of the infiltrators—mostly Pakistani commandos and officers sent for fomenting a guerrilla war targeting the Indian forces in Srinagar city. But whoever pulled the trigger on Mirwaiz Farooq on that overcast late spring day in Srinagar was acting out a sordid drama on a blood-soaked chequerboard.

The Mirwaiz was declared 'brought dead' at the SKIMS tertiary centre hospital. Throngs of supporters crowded the hospital premises to convey his bier to his ancestral redoubt in Razey Kadal. Fayaz rushed to Razey Kadal as soon as he heard the unsettling news. Ear-splitting wails and sounds of mourning greeted him on Nala Maar Road. The procession carrying the body of the slain cleric was still on its way, so Fayaz, overwhelmed by sorrow and nervous energy, joined it before it reached its destination. Little

did he know that in half an hour or so he would witness a horrendous moment in Kashmiri history.

Crossing the side streets, he joined the tail end of the procession, a big mass of people overwhelmed with grief; the mourners were young and old, men and women, weeping and beating their chests; the pall-bearers carried the coffin in turns. Fayaz had just joined the funeral procession near the Hawal area, when the paramilitary soldiers stationed at the Islamia College opened fire, ruthlessly mowing down the mourners. Scores died. Fayaz clearly remembers soldiers shooting at the wounded and stragglers. He miraculously survived the shooting. Fleeing back to Razey Kadal, he saw the dead and injured being removed through any available transport. The rescuers were hysterical, unmindful of their blood-daubed clothes, joining the effort in droves.

Official accounts tried to cover up the atrocity by claiming that the soldiers were first fired upon by someone in the procession. But the situation turned so precarious that the V.P. Singh government ruling at the centre had Governor Jagmohan—who viewed the Kashmir Vale as a den of scorpions and had adopted a mailed fist approach to the popular unrest—removed from office.

Tens of thousands of people gathered on the roads leading to Eidgah a few days later as the slain preacher's son, Omar Farooq, having taken over the reins of the Mirwaiz's office, made his public appearance at the graveside of his slain father. The city's denizens, overcoming the lines of past political divides and animosities, stood united in grief and sympathy at the poignant sight of Omar's overnight transformation from a bumfluff-sporting teen to an orphaned stand-in for their raw grief, which the much wider, violent tragedy engulfing the Vale had unleashed on almost every family. For his followers like Fayaz, the preacher-potentate was not only a heartbreak symbol, embodying their collective angst, but also a symbol of renewal and hope in the bakra community's midst.

The names and the posterity of the protestors who lost their lives to paramilitary bullets as they carried the slain preacher's bier were soon memorialized on the same roadside where they fell on that fateful day. Their names, etched on marble slabs erected on a main thoroughfare, stand as a mute reminder of the most tragic day the downtown area had seen in ages.

In the aftermath, Fayaz's younger brother joined the insurgent ranks. With both the security agencies and counter-insurgents hot on his trail, Fayaz thought it better to escape to the presumably safe confines of Delhi. After a few months, unable to handle homesickness and anxious to turn his hand to a worthwhile trade, he returned to the Vale, and to tragedy.

A stranger walked into Fayaz's home to inform him that his brother had gone missing after establishing contact with previous comrades in the Srinagar underground. A few days later, his corpse washed ashore on the banks of the Jhelum River. Counter-insurgents were ruling the roost so Fayaz's family chose not to delve into the circumstances leading to his sibling's death. A few hours later, someone visited the family and conveyed to them that before dying, he had expressed his wish to be buried adjacent to the slain Mirwaiz Farooq's grave in Eidgah. His wish remained unrequited.

Hundreds of locals attended the wake at the family's ancestral cemetery. Fayaz, who had made it a point to attend every memorial service that the conflict had inflicted on the society over the years to offer sympathy and encouragement to the bereaved families, stood on the receiving end this time.

A few days later, Fayaz still suffering bereavement throes was stopped and searched by a paramilitary patrol that found three handkerchiefs on him. To his dismay, his attempts to explain their function—wiping his spectacles and his sweaty palms—failed to convince them. His apologies notwithstanding, he was detained on the road itself and beaten black and blue, his humiliation and suffering a public spectacle for all to see. For someone who had endured countless years of bullying and had surmounted the trauma with difficulty, the incident renewed his sense of weakness, embarrassment and pain.

Fayaz's heartbroken mother died soon after. Fayaz married and sought to pick up the pieces of his life. The war had inflicted a heavy toll on their family business. His business went under and given the added burden of family, his economic condition deteriorated.

Fayaz realized late that no privileged obscurity awaited his blighted destiny, unlike the many honest boys who came out of jail after serving stiff prison sentences or preventive detentions chose to prosper and grow without being the thorn in the eyes of others, conversations or controversies. Fayaz also didn't have the nerve or the verve to morph into

the strategic strivers à la the moocher mafia-militant class or their civilian cohorts who used their guns and connections to get rich quick but always carried some or the other fear of their past catching up with them. For Fayaz who had never ever been that resourceful, a hard life borne of economic deprivation lay ahead instead. So he made his peace with it. But there were times that his recalibrated, scaled-down economic station made him regret not just his penury but the pinched childhood of his children.

Downhearted, he sold all his wife's jewellery and then used up his savings to keep their lives running. His former friends did help him from time to time, some offering money, but most just offering unwanted uncomforting sympathy. But this resource mobilisation wasn't enough to see him overhaul his life and circumstances. Or fund a new successful vocation.

One winter, Eid dawned to find him with empty pockets and an empty stomach. His elder child wanted a new dress and it broke his heart that he wasn't able to buy her one. As she headed home weepy-eyed, Fayaz's shame pervaded every nook and corner of his soul. He made a solemn prayer to God, a penitent's appeal asking why he and his children were denied these basic joys. That day his prayers were answered; a snowstorm swept the city and the denizens couldn't don their new dresses. His prayers for economic solace, though, remain unanswered to this day.

Epilogue

The Indian state regained its monopoly of violence and the political scene has now undergone a sea change with regard to the players if not the dynamics. The mass political mobilization of the late 1980s has now given way to congealed cynicism for many in Fayaz's age cohort. What remains of the war is an inveterate political sentiment that has preserved itself even as the guns have faded from the scene.

Most of the politicians on any side of the ideological or political divides are shop-soiled beyond redemption. Many on the separatist side claim their pre-eminence by laying a fallacious claim to having been part of the militant insurgency's pioneer vanguard, while the names and exploits of those who actually were have long since disappeared from the collective memory, through memory holes facilitating the former's claims without challenge.

But for tens of thousands of people, Fayaz amongst them, the Mirwaiz family's star still shines brightly on the sentimental firmament. Fayaz remains a perpetual habitué of the Jamia mosque for Friday prayers, where an undiminished zeal compels him to be a willing participant in an ersatz convergent ritual rite. He fervidly listens to Mirwaiz Umar's perorations or vies to catch a close-up glimpse of him like some article of faith. This sentiment combined with a notion of allegiance to the cleric who in their perception is a Platonic ideal—a perfect blend of the temporal and sacerdotal the theological—has seeped into their collective bakra subconscious. Gathering around this pulpit espousing popular sentiment within a strict political interpretation has provided at least an immense sense of belongng and participatory existence. Not possible otherwise.

How did he cope with his dire economic circumstances and the immense unassuageable grief the times had wreaked on him and his family, I asked him.

Fayaz gripped his knees and answered with a degree of equanimity. Many years ago, his state of mind had left him suicidal. Until one snowy winter day when he fled his shop for the umpteenth time during a shootout between the militants and the paramilitary. The boat that was carrying him across the river to his home capsized. While others clung to the boat for their dear lives and swam ashore, teetering over the edge Fayaz didn't move a muscle; he mulled over the empty promises of a new life that his optimism had dared stealing from his overly onerous existence, waiting for the river's gloomy depths to claim him. But to his chagrin, nothing happened. The river, both friend and foe in his eyes, redeemed itself as his emotional repository and a comrade. Its ageless eternal flow, its sense of permanence unsullied by weather, abuse or pollution, in his words caressed him, and to his surprise, carried him to the safety of the opposite bank. As he nursed himself back to health having caught a chill, he realized something.

'It was an important lesson I learnt from the river that day,' Fayaz said in a solemn tone as he unselfconsciously pulled on the many frayed threads of his worn-out kurta. 'One has to go on, life has to go on, one has to persevere, survive! No matter what!'

*Moe Muqaddas agitation: The theft of Prophet Muhammad's hairlock from the vaults of the Hazratbal mosque in 1963 spurred a violent civilian uprising in the Kashmir Vale. The relic was eventually recovered.

**Indira–Sheikh Abdullah Accord (1975) saw Sheikh Abdullah burying the plebiscite demand and coming to power after twenty-two years of what his friend and comrade Afzal Beig termed as political vagrancy.

***Bakra: The collective derisive term that NC supporters invented to name the Mirwaiz supporters who wore their long beards as a trademark.

*One of the founders and influential upper echelon member of the militant group Hizb-ul-Mujahideen; killed in action in Budgam area, circa April 1993.

**Interviews with released former members of militant groups by the author.

*The Ojhri camp in Rawalpindi was the main munitions hold for the Afghan opposition Mujahideen fighters. An explosion in the facility in April 1988 sent thousands of deadly missiles and rockets flying over the city and claimed hundreds of lives. See *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ojhri_Camp*. See also Yousuf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, p. 220.

*Indian Airlines flight IC-814 was hijacked by Pakistani Islamist extremist group Harkat-ul-Ansar on a routine flight from Kathmandu to Delhi on 24/12/1999 and diverted to Kandahar, Afghanistan. The crises lasted a week and ended when Indian government agreed to release Zargar and Harkat Supremo Masood Azhar and Omar Sheikh, who were at that time interned in Indian jails; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Airlines_Flight_814

The Past as Memory, 1947–1950

The Saint of Shalimar

There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception.

ALDONS HUXLEY

ON A FATEFUL day of 1284, Ala al-dawla Simnani, an Il-khanid noble of Persian origin stood on the plains of Qazvin, Iran even as the climactic battle commenced. The youthful twenty-four-year-old was in the vanguard of Mongol-Il-khanid Prince Arghun Khan's legions facing the horde of his uncle and challenger Ahmed Teguder. Even as Simnani mustered his war face and uttered his 'Allahu Akbar' war cry, as a prelude to his charging towards the enemy he suffered some kind of a rapture that in his words 'left him bewildered and dazed upon a horse'. As he chronicled later in his memoirs, 'A veil was raised before my eyes, I saw the Next World and all that it encompassed'. The vision left its aftertaste filling Simnani with an earnest feeling of withdrawing from the worldly life that he had been so besotted with.

This King Ashoka-like figure would over the next few years wrangle with his anchoritic inclination and worldly pursuits, and in the end say goodbye to it all. In years to come his insights and penning of his inroads into cosmogony, mystical anthropology embedded within metaphysical principles saw him explicate exhaustively to propound the three primordial points of Essence (being), Unitude (life) and Unity (light). The protosubstances (forma-prima) the first Realities.* His astounding clarity saw him reach the dizzy heights of monastic scholasticism, earning himself a name amongst some of the biggest stars on the Islamic mystical philosophy firmament.

In the years afterwards he would eventually emerge as grandmaster of the Kubrawiya Sufi order. Within a few years the teachings, and appeal and persona of Simnani saw Kubrawiya Sufi order's reach spread beyond Iran and into Transoxania and beyond. Among the many others that he influenced, and who were deeply steeped in Simnani's tradition and monastic philosophical ideations was his own nephew—born of his sister Fatemah Simnani—Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani—(1314–1385), whose mystical preceptors were friends of Simnani himself. In 1370 even as Timur lay Khorasan waste, Mr Sayyid Ali Hamadani left for Badakhshan and a couple of years later in 1379 appeared in the Kashmir Vale with an entourage of 400 disciples. It was this famous Persian mystic evangelist who converted large swathes of the Kashmiri population to Islam in the fifteenth century. The shrines dotting every nook and corner of Srinagar city are the resting places and monastic retreats of these original companions of Ali Hamadani, it's city's folklore full of stories extolling the fortifying presence and the miraculous idiosyncrasies of omniscient saints. This belief in an invisible, surreal world encompassed the Sufi gnostic visions, its alternate gospels and the ubiquity of mystical practitioners, spawning a culture of mystical aesthetics and its quaint ceremonies. This mystical sacral component acquired subconsciously by the city has evolved over the centuries as a measure of retaining spiritual sovereignty in the face of helplessness racked by temporal emasculation.

The Srinagar of 1947 was a sleepy city by the river, its poverty and grime fuelled by and widely disseminated from ostentatious regal affluence fuelled on exploitative feudalism of the few rich individuals trotting down its promenades and boulevards.

The endless winters which added to the suffering of the common folk signified the oppressive domination of Dogra rule. For more than a century had witnessed feudal arrogance breathing down the necks in iniquitous laws and back-breaking taxes that kept its targets in penal servitude.

That momentous year even as the clouds of Partition hovered above the subcontinent, the city boasted stories and characters as varied and resplendent as a Shakespearean drama. One of the many interesting anecdotes revolves around the revered Qadiriya order Sufi mystic Meerak Shah Kashani, who would often be spotted trotting around on a horse wearing a scabbarded sword. A gaunt man with a snow-white turban and beard in later life, there were numerous tales woven around his persona.

Stories ranging from the spiritual blessing he bestowed on the many anti-India movements, to his 'salvaging' Sheikh Abdullah from the depredations of Aghori tantrics supposedly requisitioned by the Indian government to force a change of his stance or push him into danger, are all part of the city's folklore.

The fall of 1947 in Kashmir might have passed like any other season, full of mud and slush, except for the upheaval around. The Partition had uprooted millions—Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs—especially in the plains and Bengal. For the denizens of the Vale, physically disconnected as usual from the rest of the subcontinent were too embroiled in their own affairs and headaches, all but few who could afford radios listened intently to the BBC world service, their contact to the world. For many months the BBC had been churning out details of horrific massacres in Punjab. Even as the subcontinent was partitioned and population transfers acquired a blood-curdling hue, Kashmir remained calm. But not for long.

Maharaja Hari Singh represented the latest face of Hindu sovereignty over a subject Muslim populace. As recent historical work has shown, this sovereignty hinged on the Dogra rulers intent on establishing and legitimizing their authority on Hindu confessional basis which saw Muslims relegated to second class subjects or worse—serfs.[*] Even as the subcontinent partitioned on confessional basis, Hari Singh seemed obdurately fixated to the idea of an independent kingdom that would survive the current quagmire and survive henceforth. It was the propitious few weeks between August and October 1947 when this confessional wind sown by the Dogra monarchy over a century would reap its whirlwind and put to pay these dreams of a feudal Switzerland.

Hari Singh's confessional outlook was given a fillip by his spiritual mentor, Swami Sant Dev. Dev was considered quite close to Hindu right-wing ideological outfits, and Jammu and many adjoining cities, like Mirpur and Kotli, had seen RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh) offices sprout and recruiting drives since early 1940s. Early 1947 saw the state armed forces billet themselves in Muslim-majority districts and training camps being organized for mainly Hindu populations.[**]

Given this background, Jammu city and its environs were like an explosive device waiting to explode, even as post-Partition violence washed in wave after wave of Hindu and Sikh refugees fleeing the brutalizing violence wreaked on them in West Punjab.

The first echoes of rebellion started in the Muslim majority Poonch and Mirpur districts of western Jammu, demanding 'No land tax' in July 1947. There the 60,000 odd World War II veterans were livid even as they discovered that the weapons they had been ordered to deposit with J&K police had been re-routed to Hindu and Sikh populations for purpose of 'self-defence'. In the background, with the formation of Pakistan it was but natural that the populace at large would express fealty towards the newly formed state. Given the contiguousness of territory, tribal and matrimonial links and above all the confessional identitarian undertow of the much popular Muslim Conference party, even as the large swathe of the population revolted, the Mahraja had obviously forgotten that there was no British suzerain to underwrite or protect his repressive ventures this time. The rebels though had that thing fully in mind as they pulled their rifle triggers. By the first week of October, the rebels had wiped out the local garrisons in retaliation for the marauding troops of Maharaja Hari Singh, who in cohort with armed bands of non-Muslims had been killing civilians and laying waste rebellious villages. These warlike highlanders, who had cut their teeth in the Burmese theatre against the Japanese and elsewhere against Germans and Italians in WWII, deprived the monarch of any measure of control over this swathe of territory.

By the time the Mehsud and Wazir tribesmen joined, the rebel army had already established their control over both Poonch and Mirpur, and were on their way to Srinagar, on the way wiping out the remnants of Hari Singh's remaining army paving the way for the first Indo-Pak war.

I

With these armies comprising Pathans, Poonchis and Mirpuris knocking at his gates, the story—making the rounds of Srinagar street—goes that the Dogra monarch sought an audience with Meerak Shah so as to seek some divine intervention to ward off the looming cataclysmic scenario awaiting his rule and dynasty.

On being informed of the king's request, the famed saint of Shalimar declined. The monarch, hard-pressed by the prospect of his imminent doom, wasn't ready to accept a refusal and put his royal ark on to the waters of the Dal Lake and set sail for the saint's residence to seek an audience. The saint, duly informed of the king's departure, lost his cool at what he

considered to be insolence on the part of the latter. In a fit of rage, it is said, the sage overturned his cup of tea. Consequently, as the story goes, the king's ferry moved across the Dal Lake, a violent vortex of wind arising from the Harmukh Mountain hit the lake. The storm attained such ferocity that Hari Singh thought it better to return to his palace. This aversive gesture of the saint, who had probably sensed the times to come, must have surely apprised the king that he was staring at the prospect of his oblivion.

To quote my late maternal grandfather, who served as an officer in the monarch's police force, 'The invasion was a reality check for Hari Singh, waking him up from the slumber of a delusional world view of himself. Who was Hari Singh anyway but a degenerate monarch propped up by the British crown? A glorified coolie arranging duck-shooting parties for the goras, deluded to act like a latter day Darius the Great riding triumphantly through Persepolis.'

II

Within Safa Kadal itself, apart from the shrines, two names always come to my mind when someone utters the word Sufi or mystic. One is Ghulam Muhammad Andrabi of the Aminiya Owaisi order, a somewhat reclusive and ruminative individual. His scholastic bent of mind had been acquired through his autodidactic forays into medieval Islamic mystical philosophy and his mastery over it would have better served a university philosophy class. When the time came for his initiation, he sought preceptors not from the many prevalent streams but from the rare Owaisi order, which was on the verge of becoming extinct in the Vale, after its doyen was murdered a couple of centuries ago in the Ali Kadal area of downtown by local xenophobic satraps. It was at the turn of the century that a north Kashmir highlander, Amin Saheb Kashirah, returned from his long sojourn in Sind and Punjab to revive the order in Kashmir, among those who followed him was a British Christian convert to Islam, Sakhi Wilayat Khan, who ultimately made Ganderbal Village, north of Srinagar, his monastic retreat.

The other person, the late Ghulam Ahmad Zargar, aka Ama Saheb, aka Masterji to his acquaintances, was much older and a known grandmaster of the Kubrawiya Sufi order. He had started out as a student of the legendary Sufi Bayhaqi Saheb of the downtown Nawab Bazar area. Ama Saheb downplayed his own stature and displayed no airs in response to the

veneration showered on him by all and sundry. The first time I came across Masterji was as a little boy, when I accompanied my father and sibling to his home for the kehwa parties that he invited people to twice or thrice a year. His affection for my father sprang more from the latter's affability and deference to elders than from his being the son of Ama Saheb's childhood playmate.

A perfect host, the gaunt and tall Masterji was affable and would make it a point to serve guests himself. He, along with his aged maternal uncle, the white-turbaned and garrulous Mahda Saheb, would regale everyone with anecdotes from their childhood and youth. Many a times Ama Saheb's talk would veer from anecdotes about eschatology and spiritual ventures, to the half-human half-feline form beings who unbeknownst to unconditioned human eyes were the actual guardians of the mystic shrines from untoward intrusions. He would talk of various encounters with these occult fourth dimension entities and the fatal accidents that many of his known people had incurred after having accidently trodden where they shouldn't have and their difficult recoveries from mysterious illnesses afterwards. He would then delve into earthly matters, smoothly to politics and the political mobilization, in the days of the Dogra rule, the misery of the masses, and share vignettes to illustrate as to how people endured repression and still managed to smile and laugh at their problems.

My father had some interesting experiences with Masterji. In the early days of my father's youth Masterji still taught at a school in Nowshahr, and he would always commute to and from the school on foot. Every time my father insisted on dropping Ama Saheb to school, his Enfield bike would suffer a tyre puncture or mechanical trouble and Ama Saheb would be on his way on foot, like he wanted. His dress has remained the same since those days, a loose white kurta and a churidaar, black shoes and a coat.

In mid-1984, with my term exams approaching, my father, thoroughly disgusted with my slow progress in imbibing important algebraic and geometrical concepts, put me under the tutelage of Ama Saheb. There I was, in the old wooden study room of a grandfatherly figure, who aghast at my lack of interest and insight, gave me a gentle dressing down before donning his Gandhi-style oval spectacles and proceeding to tutor me.

In the 1990s, in between his sojourns to various khatam and maehfil, the octogenarian Masterji, increasingly amnesic because of his age, could be seen in Syed Saheb's shrine fifty odd metres away from his Safa Kadal

home or in the shop of a local barber whom I would visit regularly for a shave and haircut.

The barber, a complicated character, and a decade older than me, was inquisitively well-informed on a variety of topics and consequently full of superfluous conversation. He had been picked up for interrogation by the security agencies instead of his younger brother, who was a known insurgent. In captivity, under duress of pain inflicted of the alleged severe torture perpetrated on him, his fellow captives swore that he not only confessed to his role in the Russo–Afghan War but also in the Vietnam War and the French–Algerian conflict and his complicity in Kennedy's assassination.

Out of jail in nine months, he found spiritual succour in Ama Saheb's persona and became his pupil. Ama Saheb, though, was afflicted with progressive dementia by then. Sipping tea he would talk of the old times. It was during one of my visits for a shave that he asked me about my background and I took the name of my grandfather instinctively. A smile crossed Ama Saheb's face. 'Your grandpa taught me Farsi,' was his first remark. 'We grew up in these streets, played together. He was slightly elder to me. He joined excise and customs, and I became a teacher. A very hard-edged and hard-headed man he was, someone who loved wearing breeches and had the propensity to literally kill anyone who crossed his path. I was the cooler guy in the friendship.' I smiled back.

'But most of all, very very brave,' Ama Saheb insisted on it, 'I will never forget how he sheltered my younger brother in his home at grave personal risk before he made his way to Pakistan in 1948.' Ama Saheb then resumed dunking his bagel in his tea. I shook his hand and left, wondering at this piece of family history, which I was frankly unaware of.

I brought this up with my father as soon as he returned from work that same day. In a relaxed manner, my father dwelt on the past. 'A lot of things happened back then. I was a child. It was 1947, after the tribal invasion. It was a time of Haderi Tsadri politics. Ama Saheb's family were hardcore bakras, followers of the Mirwaiz khandaan and especially Maulvi Yusuf Shah, who for the ruling party, was public enemy number one. The bakras were victims of institutionalized persecution in Srinagar along with the educated urban class, and non-koshur-speaking Mirpuri and Jammuite Muslims. Deemed fifth columnists, many among them sought exile from their hearths. The Mirwaiz Yusuf Shah, acting on his better judgement,

stealthily migrated to Pakistan. To cover his tracks, a body double, Wahab Makayee of Nawa Kadal, donned the Mirwaiz's apparel and made public appearances, mimicking the Mirwaiz's public poses and mannerisms till Maulvi Shah made it across safely.

'Ama Saheb himself was and still remains very fanatically pro-Pakistani at heart.' My father continued, 'Given the continuous debates in the United Nations and the calls for a plebiscite, a UN official came to the Valley for an assessment. This official's presence at SP College spurred Ama Saheb's younger brother, Ghulam Muhammad Zargar, aka Shameem, a perspicacious student and a budding poet, to not only shout Pro-Pakistan slogans but also present a memorandum calling for a plebiscite. At that time, Sheikh Abdullah was a known Pakistan lobby baiter and his administration never took kindly to anything that stood in contrast to their peddled narratives and stand. By the same evening, Ama Saheb's brother became the target of a massive manhunt conducted by the police downtown, but he was safely ensconced in our home.

'We had done our bit in the anti-monarchy agitations, we were known and connected and had guns and one of the uncles was an important member of the emergency administration at that time. So our home had next to nil chances of being subjected to a police raid. So we easily put up Ama Saheb's sibling there and hid him till arrangements for his journey across the LoC could be finalized. His fate mirrored that of my own cousin, but whose travails were tougher at a physical level. Ama Saheb's mum especially suffered great turmoil after her younger son's exile. For many years after, she would come knocking at our door looking for him. The corrosive political pogroms afflicting the place proved to be the undoing for many happy families back then.'

As I repeated the words that Ama Saheb had uttered about his growing up with grandfather, my father smiled, 'They were a contrast as friends. Ama Saheb was very esoteric, unlike your grandpa who was a proud contrarian. I have seen Ama Saheb in his younger days; as a handsome widower, he could have married again, anyone he wanted, but instead he chose to seek fulfilment in rearing his two young children. Totally devoting his life to the rigorous discipline that mysticism demands perhaps assuaged the grieving he felt inside, but he abhorred letting either melancholy or untamed hope corrode his inner self. The discipline probably led him to where he is today. Only men with such defined equanimity are chosen to

carrying within the burden of deep mystical perceptions and gnostic traditions. It is this task of carrying forward and disseminating of such esoteric knowledge that many before him and many after had or would continue without any remuneration.'

My baffled look made my father smile and then he told me that Ama Saheb belonged to a dwindling breed, the last of the Kubrawiya order mystics who since the days of yore had been ordained to interact with and pass on their mystical practices to non-Muslims, especially Buddhists and Kashmiri Pandits.

Rumi mentions it in his masnawi, and since I was privy to many things that Ama Saheb said, there is a probability that in medieval times these crossover practices existed. The crux of dad's conversation was that non-Muslims underwent an advertent or inadvertent mystical conversion to Islam as they explored the processes of what they perceived as convergent axiomatic beliefs; outwardly, however, they would continue adherence to their own creed. These layered though self-fashioned trends became an inherent part of the culture through the considerable recommendations of these exploratory practitioners in this part of the world and especially Kashmir.

III

The Kubrawiya order was prevalent in Iran and Khorasan. In its nascent stage, these mystics lived in cheek-by-jowl propinquity with Buddhists and Zoroastrians, who still inhabited the eastern borders of the Il-khanid empire —modern-day Afghanistan—and consequently became more accommodating of the 'other'. In his autobiographical treatise, *Chihil Majlis,* Simnani shows exceptional acknowledgement to the spiritual status of Bakshi Parinda, a non-Muslim Buddhist monk at that, and an Arghun Khan, who himself was a Buddhist court regular who was instrumental in turning the mongol prince from polytheism towards quasi Islamic beliefs in monotheism, day of judgement and the afterlife. Simnani* used a ruse to enlist the monk's help to guide one of his own disciples. While being antipathic towards much of Buddhist monastic community whose failures in the spiritual domains he traced to their pursuit of goals based on personal opinions rather than teachings of a Prophet, except Parinda, whose views he had found being consonant with Islamic one's. Semnani's work finds itself

interpreting Buddhist mystical concepts in Islamic terminology. Other mystic-scholars like Rashid-al-Din, whose own works were heavily influenced by Buddhist Hinyana texts considered Buddha to be a Prophet, but this view didn't gain currency within Muslims. Although it was without doubt that Buddhists from Khorasan and Muslim mystics had indulged in collaboration and crossovers in the times of yore.

In the fourteenth century Simnani's nephew Mir Sayed Ali Hamadani's arrival in Kashmir changed both the cultural and mystical topography of the Vale. Given his affiliation to the Kubrawwiya order it was but natural that in years to come it became one of the most pre-eminent mystical orders to take root in Kashmir and with it the cosmopolitan mores that had seen Khorasan and Transoxania's intellectual domains bloom. With the advent of Safavid rule over Iran and their forced conversion of its population into the Shiite fold, the tradition and practices of Simnani and his cohort, irrelevant in the newer confessional mores morphed into a palimpsest fit for academic research. It would be in Kashmir or what many termed the 'little Iran' that these traditions would continue in one way or the other.

Ama Saheb represented the latter-day chain link of Kubrawiya mystics steeped in this esoteric crossover tradition. Going through the old writings what I had heard one way or the other on Srinagar streets now found itself getting moored in the past.

As Ama Saheb had divulged, in the Vale even the Kashmiri Pandits indulged in Sufi prayers inwardly. It wasn't classical school Sufism, but it came to exist and it wasn't limited to the Vale.

Perhaps these mystically inclined people approached each other in those surreal domains as nude souls bereft of the arrogance bestowed by robes, signifying the cosmopolitanism of previous social eras. These relationships had withered away and convergences had fractured over a period of time. And in a way, one needed to suspend belief to believe that these fractures would wholly mend themselves, especially when the purveyors of these crossings like Ama Saheb were dying slowly. On the flip side there were these stories mentioned repeatedly especially in older gatherings which I heard through secondary sources that mentioned the heterodox notions of many Kashmiri Sufis who indulging in their forty-day meditations in Harmukh mountain were bewildered to find Buddha traversing around the ranges in their visions that led them to harbour beliefs that the verses pertaining to the olive tree in the Holy Quran actually allude to the Bodhi

tree. Many others were heard deriding the spiritual stature of Dalai Lama, who many a times I heard was dismissed as a kid trying to make it somewhere in the mystical domains.

Let me confess that I did start to see mystical traditions and mysticism in a new light. Walking the lanes around the shrines evoked inquisitiveness about the past, the people and the convergences. My inquiries into the metaphysical started to encompass the alternate versions beyond the works of Kant and the poetry of Jim Morrison. I have never felt comfortable in the shrill din of many shrines, neither with the local poetics eulogizing the mystagogues or their conventicles. But that late afternoon, I ventured out of a friend's place in Zaina Kadal and in an effort to avoid the ubiquitous sandbagged bunkers, where one always ran the risk of being stopped by the soldiers for no rhyme or reason, as I walked the entire length of this inner Zaina Kadal lane, my gaze wandered to a mosque on my right and within its sanctum, the shrine of Yaqoob Sarfi. Although I had no knowledge of his antecedents or of his work corpus, the visible absence of crowds fuelled my inquisitiveness.

As I put many of the questions pertaining to mystical crossovers to Andrabi Saheb a couple of days later in his prayer room, which was sparsely furnished but bedecked beautifully, he first kept silent and then remarked adroitly, with an ebullient expression, 'One could dismiss all this talk of mystical convergences as some redundant pedagogic theorems. But I have always surmised that there are endless possibilities of engagement within the sinuous trails crocheted within the esoteric realms. Sometimes it is our preferences to dwell beyond our chosen paths. As for non-Muslims, sometimes luckier sorts among them attain transformation of their spiritual signature by trying to restage what we do. Wherever these crossover inclinations manifest, it was often dependent on the munificent nature of both the preceptors and their pupils. Those ordained for these specific roles, especially interacting with other social-confessional groups through the mystical language, whether as students or teachers are required to remain strict to a conservative line and maintain zipped lips.

'But my insight and I have heard that the states they acquire after mystical conversion to Islam can be heady and mesmerizing for them. Even things we find and take as given. But many a times why would they even venture this far, and why shouldn't they try their hand at it or a walk in, but

I always end up with the same answer, we don't hold a franchise over God. We don't, nobody does.'

'Really?' I remarked, noting the differentiation of us and them.

'Yes, our franchise starts and culminates with the Holy Prophet! But I am surprised that someone with an enthusiastic interest in Western philosophy would put this question to me.' According to him these mystical crossovers were few and far between in the rest of the subcontinent. As I asked him as to the reason why, it was here that he mentioned the name of Ala Al-dawla Simnani and the influence of the Kubrawiya order within the Vale environs. Kashmiri Sufis were according to Andrabi Saheb welded to the Iranian tradition, whereas most of the Indian subcontinent adheres to the Turkic tradition. And as is wont the Iranians are by nature a more mellow accommodating race than the stern Turkic tribes. The nature of people seeps in to their attitudes too.' I saw a wide smile cross his face as Andrabi Saheb mentioned the last line.

I digressed from the subject of crossovers and brought up the name of Yaqoob Sarfi.

'A known theologian of his times and a mystic who spent most of his life teaching at a school of theology in Agra. Sarfi was marginalized and hounded from his home by a cabal of windbags comprising mostly immigrants from Central Asia who dominated the sacerdotal class.'

'He left Srinagar for good?' I asked.

'Yes he did. Though he did sum up his travails by penning a Farsi quatrain, which translates as, "This place is so wretched that your best skills turn to handicaps." He did return, nearing his own end, to find a resting place.'

Andrabi Saheb stood up for the afternoon prayers, even as my mind raced to picture an individual left unredeemed by fate. As I stood up to leave, Andrabi Saheb spoke again as if anticipating my silent observation. 'He wasn't left unredeemed, though. He had the last laugh. One of his many students was a Pathan boy named Ahmed from Sirhind.'

The name rang a bell.

'Yaqoob Sarfi taught the theological corpus to this boy who later was bestowed with the sobriquet of Mujaddid Alif Sahi; whenever people talk of him they mention Sarfi in the same breath!' Andrabi Saheb said as he rolled up his shirtsleeves in preparation for his ablutions.

The import of his words struck me like a revelation. I had come across Sirhindi's name, a mystic philosopher par excellence, without doubt the best and the most eloquent, whose intellectual ardour and philosophical sweep has remained beyond reach or replication for others even after four hundred years. Known all round the world, Sirhindi's life and work has engendered reams of books and discussions from the subcontinent to the Levant back then, and from Israel to North America in modern times.

'In worldly realms many a times students reflect the greatness of their teachers with unjust fates,' he added. 'And by the way, Sarfi himself belonged to the Kubrawiya Sufi order.'

I smiled and took his leave, thinking about the irony of it all, that Sirhindi's teacher remains unknown in his own place of origin, but the redemption proffered by providence through a brilliant student surely mitigated the travails of the past.

Some weeks later I made it a point to visit Sarfi's Zaina Kadal shrine. After offering fateha in the solitude space bereft of anyone else around, I sat down wondering that the mould in which nature creates teachers whose pupils attain great height had ceased production on its factory line in the Vale long back.

Epilogue

In October 1993, Indian troops laid a siege to the venerated Hazratbal shrine, to force the militants holed up inside to surrender. After a high voltage drama that lasted more than a month, the siege ended. Even as the troops left the place the issue of whether the Prophet's hair relic had been tampered with or replaced during the standoff came up and among the first individuals to be contacted at that juncture was my maternal aunt's husband, Professor Akbar Dar, who at that time was the vice chancellor of the Agricultural University. Being fairly close to him, he would often open up and talk to me of the times present and times gone by in the Vale's mystic domains. He smilingly revealed that he readily agreed because it meant reprising the role of his former friend and mentor. He had been part of Meerak Shah's inner circle, although considerable age difference separated the two and both belonged to different mystical orders. It had been thirty-odd years since the 1963 crisis created by the robbery of the same Prophet's hair relic. At that time, Meerak Shah's intervention

confirming the genuineness of the recovered relic allayed the fears of the populace who feared it had been tampered with and replaced with a bogus. Meerak Shah had stepped forward and vouched for its authenticity.

Meerak Shah remained a larger-than-life figure and a man of consequence within the socio-political scene. Even the government knew where he was placed. In his later years, Srinagar's denizens would often spot his personal jeep flying a green pennant. Was the mystic being defiant and challenging the political overlordship of his homeland symbolically through his assertion of the Sufi concept of wilaya? We may never know. But he was political no doubt. Dar Saheb recalled something more. In 1965, as Operation Gibraltar went ahead, and Pakistani soldiers in mufti entered the Vale to foment an armed insurrection, Kashmir police raided Meerak Shah's Qadiriya monastery in Shalimar after intelligence reports indicated that the saint was harbouring the Pakistani infiltrators. A cache of weapons was seized though no infiltrators were found. Given the stature of the saint, the authorities baulked at the prospect of arresting him but arrested Faqeer Din Mohammad, aka Maama Saheb, his helper and future successor.

Meerak Shah died in 1971, in the aftermath of the Indo-Pakistan war that saw the liberation of Bangladesh.

In 2013 I was back in Kashmir and by chance hoping to meet a mystically inclined Kashmiri Pandit friend who informed that she was putting up at the guest house of a shaivaite monastery, surprisingly sited half a mile away from Mirakh Shah's shrine. I drove over and in that very posh neighbourhood, negotiating an inclined road. To my left was this expansive house and property. Here resided a well-known Kashmiri Pandit Shaivite philosopher Laxman Joo un be knowest to many including me. His ashram, perched on these Zabarwan foothills, attracted all and sundry from his community and beyond. As I ventured into the fortified compound guarded by paramilitary soldiers, I couldn't but notice the photographs that lined the walls of the guest house even as a big LCD TV played out videos of this old gaunt philosopher. These photographs included the who's who of Indian polity including Karan Singh, the son of Kashmir's erstwhile Dogra monarch, paying their obeisance to the pandit-saint. Of the many stories attributed to Laxman Joo include that the ruling Gandhi family would come visiting him often.

In mid-1984, that the mystic philosopher was paid a visit by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The one-to-one conversation lasted some

time and according to the gossip grapevine, Mrs Gandhi appeared much perturbed after she emerged from the meet. A few months later, after she fell victim to an assassin's bullets, it was said that the philosopher had warned of her being near the end of her days. Hearing this I recalled the other story that made the round in the city back then, the same week she had gone to pay obeisance at the shrine of Sheikh Hamza Raina, the patron saint of the city, perched on the Koh-i-Maaran hill, when as she entered she had slipped and fallen in the sanctum sanctorum, and many people who heard or had witnessed what may be an apocryphal story surmised that the fall was a bad omen signifying an imminent calamity about to strike her.

One can discern that in the Kashmir of today, the exigencies of nation states and the loyalties demanded extend even into the occult realms and its followers had taken their sides in its politics, a far cry from the convergent days of yore. Its just a matter of conjecture, but I have always wondered as to how these crossover must have felt like for the novitiates wanting to shed the differences and make a plunge.

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The Transporter

...no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger—something better, pushing right back.

ALBERT CAMUS

ON A CLOUDY, chilly west-Yorkshire morning in July 2006, I stood on the platform of the sleepy Bradford Interchange alongside my dad waiting for a train that would take us to Halifax, where my younger sibling lived. My dad had just stepped off a plane at Leeds airport after a tiring overnight haul from Delhi. Given my own sleepy state, I ventured downstairs to grab a cup of coffee at the station concourse. When I returned I found my dad unusually silent, his gaze fixed on a tall, bearded and well-groomed Asian man in his late thirties with family in tow. 'That's my elder cousin Ali, I think,' dad remarked as he tried to get up and approach the man. I dissuaded my father, reminding him that if his cousin were older than him, he would be well into his eighties by now.

Perhaps dad had lost track of time on that train station, which he did confess to later. But the memory of the suffering that had hit the maternal side of his family sixty-odd years ago remained fresh, lurking in some corner of his memory, waiting to be triggered instantly by a silhouette or a resemblance 5,000 miles away from home.

As the train rolled through the lush green highland meadows of Calderdale, our conversation divagated from our planned visits to Wakefield, Rydal Mount, Bolton Abbey and the Brontë sisters' estate to my dad's pensive reminisces about this particular cousin of his. In 1946, Mohammad Ali, a promising law graduate, had recently returned from his sojourn at Aligarh Muslim University. Unheeding of the opposition of his immediate family, he turned down a high-ranking job in the state police to

start a full-time lucrative legal practice. But fate, as it turned out, had something else in store.

In 1948 Ali was abruptly arrested. He and his two accomplices, Ali Naqi and another whose name dad couldn't recall, were charged with sedition and waging war against the state. They were later identified as key conspirators in a plot to assassinate the immensely popular leader, Sheikh Abdullah. According to the charge sheet, the plotters, angered by the leader's pro-India slant and active connivance in expediting the state's accession to India, had hoarded firearms in a hotel room in the city centre, from where they had planned to take out the 'Lion of the Vale' as he addressed his next public rally in the square opposite. While Ali and his friends were denounced as traitors by ruling party, the newspapers and state-owned radio derided them as having been thoroughly brainwashed by Jinnah and pro-Pakistan rhetoric at Aligarh University during their student days, but not many people paid attention to their suffering and torture during their incarceration.

Serendipitously, Ali and his friends made good their escape in the aftermath of a jailbreak a few months later. Many people surmised that the jailbreak was engineered under the orders of Sheikh Abdullah. Immensely popular and intensely comfortable within the vast swathe of uneducated masses who had been treated as less than yokels and serfs by the feudatory system in place, Abdullah was loath to see the emergence of educated and young opposition figures, who, easily discerning that he was intellectually null, could undermine his claim to undisputed leadership. Thus 'push back' across the LoC was a ready and attractive option for his administration to rid the populace of 'unsavoury' and 'benighted' elements who in his view were hell bent on pursuing the accession and plebiscite issues beyond and out of the shadows of minor diplomatic inconveniences for his friend Jawahar Lal Nehru's government.

After Ali and his friends escaped, their families waited to know of their whereabouts with bated breath until many days later the radio station of Pakistan-administered Kashmir announced their arrival in Muzaffarabad. In the coming months, the rest of the family, except for his two married sisters, joined him in Mirpur where he settled down after joining the judiciary. He eventually shifted to the United States after retirement.

I

West Yorkshire county in the north of England, with its dales, brooks, maple trees and weather patterns-resembles Kashmir like some twin sister, and it was but natural that my dad always felt at home in its environs. All of us had subconsciously agreed to rebuild not just our lives but also our home there. In 1989 The latest wave of conflict in Kashmir had seen us staring at the dissolution of the society, as well as of our concept of our place in it. Our own Kashmir had to be built and regained in self-imposed exile perhaps. But I guess the past did weigh heavily on my dad's mind like it did on mine. Even as I tried shaking it off, building my memories anew, expurgating the bad ones, he on the other hand sought to come to terms with it one step at a time.

A movie aficionado, dad rediscovered Gregory Peck, Clark Gable, Ava Gardner and Robert De Niro through DVDs. De Niro's *Once Upon a Time in America* was a personal favourite of his and not without reason. The childhood sequences depicted in the movie were very similar to the much-cherished and memorialized events of his own early years. Dad also rapidly learnt the workings of a desktop and how to surf the net. He was ecstatic when he came across a blog by Khalid Hasan, a former Pakistani journalist and one-time press secretary to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Hasan, a Jammu denizen born in Srinagar, had witnessed the late 1947 Jammu massacres that saw the Muslim population of the city and its environs suffer a pogrom, firsthand, and later penned a book about the tragic occurrences, which had led to a veritable ethnic cleansing of Muslims from Jammu. The blog included the reflections of an engineer, Mr Gupta, who like Hasan had settled in the United States, and his recollections of the travails of his non-Muslim family in Mirpur, a outlying sub-district of Jammu at around the same time, which saw the entire Hindu and other non-Muslim populations driven out or herded into concentration camps.

Though much has been written about the violence during the Partition and its aftermath, the events in Jammu remain a grey area. For dad, reading the blog elicited a telling of his late maternal uncle Aziz's story, who had witnessed the Jammu massacres firsthand and survived their bloodletting.

Every child of my generation in the family remembers our maternal granduncle Aziz, who went by the oft-used sobriquet of Jatt. Born in the upper city-side as a much blessed and spoilt brother among five sisters, Aziz was always dressed tastefully in a neat shalwar-kameez and a white tassar silk turban. His penchant for violence and wrestling people twice his

size to the floor in organized tournaments had earned him his nickname. He was a legend in his own right, a well-known and well-connected man in his heydays. He reared rabbits and once upon a time had a pet cocker spaniel named Peter.

Aziz lost his father early in life. He abandoned his studies soon after, acquired a Bedford truck and turned to trucking, a profession that was considered honourable and well-paying in those times. He plied the Rawalpindi and Jammu routes, nursing the dream of owning the largest transport fleet on both sides of the Chenab.

II

The partition of the subcontinent carried a horrendous price for the people living within its fault lines. A *TIME* magazine issue called it a 'competitive massacre' while reporting on the massive bloodletting in Punjab.

In Srinagar at about the same time the Silk Route caravans had dissipated quite early and the Turkic Caravan Serai in Safa Kadal had started to empty. In a few weeks, after India and Pakistan were delivered onto the world stage, the boundaries of Kashmir state would also change geographically and Aziz's own views and definition of life would be irreversibly altered and mutilated in the aftermath.

A hundred-odd years ago a rebellion in Poonch district had been brutally put down by the troops of the Dogra monarch. Now, in a strange dint of circumstances, the descendants of the same population were about to take up arms and sound the death knell of the very same exploitative and vicious Dogra monarchy. By the autumn of 1947, Poonch and Mirpur were engulfed in the throes of war. The restive population, chafing under stifling policies and keenly aware that British suzerainty was no longer present to guarantee or underwrite the depredations of the Dogra monarchy, were ready and impatient to give the monarch Hari Singh his long overdue comeuppance. Buttressing the belligerence of these warlike highlanders were nearly sixty thousand demobilized British Indian army war veterans. Ironically, Ibrahim Khan, who led the Poonch rebellion, was a member of Hari Singh's privy council.

That autumn found Aziz in Jammu, staying with family friends, a very well-known hotelier family. He was on a break from his busy schedule of plying goods to and from Sialkot, a somewhat twin city of Jammu in Punjab

province. The Partition was in force and Aziz knew he would not be able to ply the route till the dust settled. His aversion to the dry cold back home led him to prefer staying in Jammu for the time being. But things were changing even as he saw Hindu and Sikh refugee caravans from adjoining Sialkot and Gujranwala areas reach Jammu environs. Many of them were armed and as the grapevine through Jammu Muslim populace heard was the standing orders of the administration was not to disarm them. Aziz also noticed that the state army populated heavily by Dogras had started to billet itself around Muslim majority localities accompanied by armed civilians. Things didn't look bright, many Jammu Muslim families had already migrated to the Sialkot, as Aziz mentioned to my dad many years later, but he was thoroughly mistaken to have taken things in his stride and missing out the obvious.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the war started in Poonch and Mirpur, and the monarchist army found itself crushed by an amalgamate rebel legions. At about the same time the dogra forces and irregulars started a systematic cleansing of Muslims around Jammu.

Buoyed by their military success, the rebel army marched on to Srinagar, reinforced by Waziri Afridi and Mehsud Pashtun tribesmen many incensed by the violence perpetrated on Muslim population and seething with revenge WWII veterans join their erstwhile comrades in the hour of their need. To quote my maternal grandma, Maryum Khan, it was the abrupt interruption of the electricity supply to his palace—the advance guard of the invading troops had destroyed the electric station at Mohra near Uri—that led the monarch to grasp the gravity of the situation. The state forces, who over the years had been adept at raping, maiming and killing unarmed Kashmiris, proved woefully inadequate in fighting the Poonchis, Mirpuris and Pathans, and were destroyed twig and branch in their confrontations with them at Muzzafrabad and Garhi Dupatta areas.

The story goes that Hari Singh fled to Jammu as fast as he could. The word on the street went that Hari Singh's wife, the queen, on arriving in Jammu loosened her tresses, effecting a show of defeat and abject despair, and lamented loudly '*Abdullah haanji*[*] *ne Kashmir khaya'*, inflaming the passions of the local Dogra Hindus.

The Jammu Muslims, ethnically and linguistically totally different from Kashmiri Muslims, under the leadership of Chaudhary Ghulam Abbas, had a very pro-Pakistan slant to their politics and never ever acknowledged the

Valley politicians or their 'Great Leader' Abdullah who was seen to be close to Nehru and were openly pursuing their own goals to seek accession of the state to Pakistan. Given the situation, where Hindu Dogras and Sikh refugees had laid rooftop sieges around Muslim localities in Jammu City proper and were constantly sniping and killing the inhabitants, the Jammu Muslims ran a sit-in at Shaheedi Chowk in the city and in the end, the monarch's rump administration already working towards being muslim free, promised them that their demand to be allowed safe migration to Pakistan in refugee caravans would be acceded to. The promise was never kept and a massacre took place outside Jammu. And Aziz disappeared.

On 25 November 1947, the Mirpur rebels and Pathan lashkars finally entered Mirpur. The subsequent massacres and rapine of Sikh and Hindu population as well as the refugees who had sought shelter was a reprise to the Jammu carnage. Survivors were interned into concentration camp, very few survived.

Given the precarious situation spiralling out of hand, the emergency administration led by Sheikh Abdullah requisitioned the services of three seasoned police officers—Mehr Ali, Ihsan Dar and my maternal grandfather Amir Muhammad Khan—to bring the situation under control. The latter, also husband to Aziz's elder cousin, arrived in the midst of the chaotic, blood-soaked aftermath. His first act was to release the then deputy inspector general of police Jammu range, Mian Rashid, who had been locked up in prison by the monarch's overzealous henchmen. According to Grandma my grandfather found Rashid had been detained in full uniform, it is said that he was infested with lice and bugs by the time he was led out and dispatched safely to Pakistan.

My grandfather got to work, from the Peer Mitha Police Station, but even with his best efforts Aziz was nowhere to be found. He broke the bad news back home; Aziz had presumably been killed along with rest of the ill-fated refugee caravan.

The systematic brutality of the violence in Jammu to cleanse out its Muslim population left a deep scar on my grandfather. The cries of deranged women in refugee camps who had lost their loved ones, and the suicide of an Imam who had killed his five daughters before killing himself, angered my grandfather and left a lasting impression on him. Among the kidnapped girls was Chaudhary Ghulam Abbas's daughter. The lackadaisical attitude and lack of concern displayed by Sheikh Abdullah led

my grandfather to nurse a lifelong derision and hatred for the former. Back home, Aziz's heartbroken mother and sisters let go of their wild hopes of his return and let the extended family perform his wake and funerary ghaibana janaza, and then his forty-day chehlum.

In the midst of the winter of 1948, my grandmother was convalescing in her paternal home after giving birth. That winter night remained firmly etched and fresh in her memory decades later when she narrated it to me. The hour was late as she sat next to her bua—also my great-grandmother—who was disconsolate at the loss of Aziz, her only son. At around midnight there was a knock on the door, which my great-grandmother went to answer. She was about to slam the door shut in the face of the raggedy mendicant in tattered clothes with the customary words of excuse, maaf thav, when the man held her arm and weepy-verge identified himself as Aziz, her presumed dead son.

My naani remembered Aziz's beaten look and battered state, his swollen feet and his footwear that refused extrication. As everyone gathered, Aziz's maamu found an ingenious way to rid him of the burden of his stuck shoes, using a traditional shaving razor to slice the shoes off his feet.

Aziz had been walking for weeks. His escape from the killing fields of Jammu is a story out of a Hollywood movie. Aziz, along with the family friends he was staying with, boarded the trucks that were to ferry the refugees to Pakistan. With them was their pregnant daughter-in-law. As soon as they left the city, the trucks were stopped and the passengers forcibly disembarked and massacred. In Aziz's words, for the first time in his life, he witnessed the decapitation of people with swords. Among the many attackers was a fellow trucker, a Sikh. Aziz, instantly recognizing him, implored in Punjabi, '*Sardara, tu tey mera dost haan*.' To which the Sikh friend replied, '*Aziza*, *ki karaan, main majboor haan*.'

But somehow, Aziz escaped that meat grinder. He fled from his murderous pursuers, running alongside his host family like a guardian angel and helped them escape as well. He unwound his turban and used it as a harness to carry their pregnant daughter-in-law on his back. In the darkness, they ran and ran without stopping to even catch their breath. Late in that dreadful autumn night, unable to go any further, they stopped at a Gujjar dhoke, where a shepherd family lived. Apprehensive, Aziz ventured in. It

was the lady of the house who informed them that they were near Sialkot and already within Pakistani territory.

In that dhoke, much to their relief, the daughter-in-law gave birth to a child, a girl. Their arrival in Pakistan allayed the fears of Aziz's family friends. After a couple of weeks, uneasy about the impact that his disappearance would have on his own family, and fearful of the intrigues of the Kashmiris who had fled the Vale in the wake of persecution and who were hounding him for no other reason than seeing him as an interloper, he decided to return to the Vale through the northern mountain passes. On the way, after listening to his story, he was guided by Pakistani border guards.

Two days after his return, Aziz ended up in the Kothi Bagh police lock-up. After a day or so of recuperation, he went to attend the fajr prayers at the local mosque. There, curious neighbours, acquaintances and friends mobbed him, asking him about his horrendous experience, which he narrated in a palpably sincere tone. People listened to him with sympathetic expressions as well as wide-eyed looks of muted outrage. All went well until one bystander derisively dismissed his travails as a gratuitous pantomime. Aziz was astonished that his tribulations could be dismissed by anyone with such vulgar levity. It angered him no less to think that his lived nightmare could leave anyone so unmoved and incapable of any empathetic thought.

Given his toughie past, Aziz repeatedly warned the man to shut up. The man was unrelenting in his criticism, and for his efforts ended up near comatose after Aziz had finished wiping the floor of the mosque's hamman with him. The eyewitnesses swore to the family that they had never seen the usually blasé Aziz exhibit such violent, murderous rage as that which propelled him to thrash the man. The gore and bloodshed of the Partition had trammelled his words and left him in a way tongueless, and now his voice saw itself best expressed in violence. Perhaps he was venting all of his pent-up anger and frustration and the trauma he had endured over previous weeks.

Aziz had bitten off more than he could chew. The man was an influential worker of the National Conference, the political party at the helm of the emergency administration, and in no time cops swooped down on Aziz's home and led him away, handcuffed.

The fettered Aziz was presented to the Great Leader. As soon as he entered the leader's office, the latter lost his temper and raising his voice,

accused Aziz of treason, branding him a saboteur out to destroy his dream of Naya Kashmir. The rest of the story always made my maternal grandfather—the police officer—chuckle. It is said that instead of cowering in fear, Aziz, evidently underwhelmed by Sheikh Abdullah's mass appeal and authority, lost his temper and leapt at the leader, mouthing the vilest abuse he could muster. It was the Great Leader's second-in-command, the future Trujillo doppelgänger, Bakshi Ghulam Muhammad, known to be a good reader of men's character, who intervened and calmed Aziz's temper.

Removing Aziz's fetters, Bakshi played the good cop and with folded hands apprised Aziz of the changed circumstances where the Indians had a solid foothold in the Vale, and a war with Pakistan was still raging, the last thing anybody needed was people here getting to know what the Jammu Muslims had to go through first hand through a survivor. Bakshi implored his restraint. He told Aziz that the political party and the emergency administration were trying hard to keep the news of the Jammu massacre under wraps, to obviate any chance of a belated and reactive conflagration in the Vale. Aziz listened, and perhaps realizing that it wasn't worth the trouble left.

That wasn't the end of Aziz's travails. His mother, already heartbroken and ill after his disappearance, never recovered and died. Within a few weeks one of his sisters died of cancer and then came the blow of the arrest, incarceration and exile of his nephew Ali—whom we met at the beginning of this tale—which left Aziz shattered. But he regained his composure enough to oversee the departure of Ali's brothers and their mother, his sister, to Pakistan. This sister never forgot her roots and eventually returned for a visit in the mid-1970s; she passed away a few days later in Aziz's home, where she had been born.

In the meantime, Aziz did not seek to reclaim his Bedford truck, which he had abandoned in Jammu, nor did he make any effort to claim custodianship of the hotels owned by his family friends in Jammu, even though they had given him the ownership papers. He voiced his state of mind to his relatives, the immense sense of gloom he felt and the absurdity that life meant for him. Eventually, he immersed himself in a routine, which he thought necessary for his rehabilitation, and resumed doing what he had done all his life with a passion—trucking. This time he chose not to be a freelancer but to work in the employ of the government trucking company.

In his later years, his anger seemed internalized and non-verbal, cradled in some deep corner of his mind, manifesting off and on as apathy or alternatively, hostility towards authority. In the mid-1950s, after a scuffle with an official of the transport department, he was arrested, even as his nephew, the transport commissioner of the state at that time, was in the vicinity. Brought before him on the road and much to the nephew's chagrin, Aziz refused to recognize him or seek redress.

Aziz married and brought up an adopted son. His refusal to divulge the details of his past, especially to the younger brood of his nephews and nieces, was perhaps bred from a desire not to stir the harsh side of their imaginations over the innocent beautiful ones. But even I noticed the poignancy in his demeanour, especially in his eyes, when I came across him. In retrospect, I guess these were the emanations of an amputated soul.

But he never failed to dress immaculately in his trademark off-white Pathani suit and matching tussar silk turban; a hark back to the style of dressing in vogue during his days of trucking through the undivided Punjab of yore. He retired and spent time travelling, visiting the families of his nephews and nieces, which were located on both sides of the LoC.

My dad remembered his Aziz maamu for his riffs, which, my dad opined, hinted at both the sense of irony and cynicism pervading the former's insight and judgement. In the 1960s, my dad was an idealistic young civil servant, and given the trends in education and economy, very optimistic about the society's future at that time. One wintry day, he saw Aziz maamu walking down the street after supping in an eatery. As my dad offered him a lift and pointed to the young girls in college uniforms and young men cradling their books to prove his point that the future of the Vale was bright, Aziz wryly smiled ignoring my dad's contention and remarked cynically, 'After they released me, I straight away headed to Maisuma Road to gobble harissa. It was winter and I was feeling cold. But this shop that I now visit, it is for a reason. It has an apt name, Naya Kashmir Harissa shop.'

My dad fumbled for a reaction as Aziz continued, 'This was what their hocus-pocus of Naya Kashmir was all about, a veritable harissa shop.' With a smile, he took my dad's leave. My father recalled how wise and astute Aziz's assessment had been. The Vale and it environs were actually a harissa shop, ruled and pervaded by a kleptomaniacal class who would

exploit and sell themselves and others to slake themselves at a golden brook.

Aziz passed away in his mid-eighties and lies buried in his ancestral graveyard near the Takht Suleman foothills in Dalgate.

We were headed to London to visit the daughter of a friend of my dad's who had just given birth to her firstborn. From the train window I pointed out the Wakefield station to dad. Ever the incorrigible Anglophile, he said, 'The setting of *The Vicar of Wakefield*,' and smiled. I remembered. It was one of the bedtime stories that he would read out to my sibling and me in the dark, candle-lit hours of the harsh snowy winter nights in an energy-starved city when we were kids in kindergarten. He then turned to me and smiled again. After a pause he asked me if I still remembered Tennyson's lines, his favourite rainy day lines, as he termed them. Even as I missed out the 'Though much is taken, much abides' line, he corrected me and joined me in chorus, as though intoning a prayer of thanks.

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.

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[*] Haanji: Boatman—a derogatory epithet to describe any Kashmiri.

Afterword: Winter 2013

One of the walking wounded, we were all walking wounded.

PHILIP CAPUTO, *A Rumour of War* (1977)

SNOW IS FALLING outside. Our hands feel chilblained, given the weather we have endured. The freezing temperatures over the last few days have plunged further in the cold cascading drizzle of a late January afternoon. The rain hammering Ibu's windscreen as we left home has now morphed into a silent Brownian snowflake fall. In the distance, the usually tawny-hued Mount of Solomon is covered in a crocheted shroud of snow, the Harmukh mountain range in its backdrop has turned itself eminently invisible cloud cover drape. The road and its embankments are slowly turning into shelves of grimy snow.

I unsuccessfully scuff the lumps of snow stuck to my shoe soles on to the concrete step before dousing my cigarette and stepping inside.

The walls of the Café Arabica are adorned with posters of Billie Holiday, Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant films, giving it an American diner feel. The many patrons are busy digging their forks and knives into Mediterranean fare served to them at their wooden tables lined with ketchup and mustard containers. It is a hip eatery where smartly dressed twenty-something lads and family types crowd in to reprise the scenes of a picture perfect suburban normativity while living their lives in purgatory in real time.

Upstairs on the balcony is the smoking zone. We plonk ourselves on the customized wooden chairs, a round mahogany-coloured wooden table in front of us. On a crowded table to our left, a particularly funny looking cross-dresser sits amongst a boy-man gathering. Glancing across, Ibu jokes about the incorrigible pederasty that was the bane of the eastern societies

for centuries. A hearty laugh accompanies his surmise that the cross-dresser is an old school pederast's fantasy come true. I join in the banter with my observations on Najibullah Quraishi's award-winning documentary *Dancing Boys of Afghanistan*, which has a similar theme.

Gazing through the big windows we both watch the snow drape the bare chinar trees in the park across the road. Everything appears so serene that it is almost unimaginable that the Vale has been in a constant state of war since 1990. The insurgency helped ignite a conflict that engulfed everything from the haunts of this city's flâneurs to the highlanders trudging through the meadows and mountains of the countryside. That plunged the populace into the throes of a war that is in its third decade.

As we order our food, the talk turns to changed times and the changing mores. People whom we knew, some who were part of the war as insurgents, some who were bystanders, many of whom also endured jail and deprivation, surprisingly harbour no syndromes of victimhood. There is a strange form of respect they accord to their own selves for having endured the testing times and fording over the vagaries that ultimately saw them pick up their lives again. I recall an anecdote.

A few weeks preceding, I found myself scouring book titles in a South Delhi mall. As I picked up a book, I saw two Kashmiri boys, who started an animated conversation in both vernacular Koshur and English. This conjoint loud thinking within earshot of everyone around dwelt on the perpetual suffering in the Vale and how it had now made its way into published prose. Given my impersonal face, their voices went up a few notches; perhaps my nose had given my Kashmiri origin away. The polemic continued, divagating into their own hopeful wishes of penning and publishing the memorialization of their own travails. In their Peter Pan world view, publication of lightweight Kashmir-centric books and novels was the achievement of intellectual autarky. This would in their view engage and defeat the unscrupulous political sophistry and the blackly cynical narratives peddled by the media to smudge the antecedent causes and bloody ramifications of the Kashmir conflict.

What I didn't express then was that personally, this recurrent emphasis on victimhood irks me. For all of the cruelties and suffering borne of oppression that I saw and endured firsthand, I never envisaged carving out an identity based on victimhood. I abhor being a boy for some liberal intellectual elite, playing to their guilt in the restless hope of grabbing some

effete mediocrity personage slot or vying for their patronization, born from their want of issues to dabble in. Nor do I cherish the thought of being some native informant assisting the forays of academics propelled by the dictates of publish or perish. I am not a victim. Period.

This espresso diner regularly attracts acquaintances and friends of mine like a magnet. I have been here a few times. Nobody mentions the war in terms of our own scarred memories of our alternate selves and the furtive, frightened lives led by our generation anymore. The upheavals of 2008 and 2010 that saw thousands of youngsters take to the streets against the might of the Indian state are too recent, debated and inured like countless other tragedies into our memory. It may be easy for many to indulge in easy judgements and dismiss people who fervently talk politics in coffee shop comfort, eating shawarma and baked trout and using iPhones to vent on social media in real time in a bid to outsoar others, but most of these guys were both witnesses as well as victims.

The insights of many attained a questioning mars beyond expectations. The Syrian conflict and its images, beamed via Liveleak and YouTube, inform the discussions. One attendant observer remarks that if the Syrian war is an insurgency, then the conflict in the Valley doesn't qualify as one. Another seconds him, 'There was nothing like the Tet offensive or Panjshir fighting here,' he says. Then what was it, another asks. Another one quotes Pervez Musharraf's biography, *In the Line of Fire*, and how on being confronted with the threat of an all-out Indian attack in 2002, the General down played the possibility. In his view, the massive number of Indian forces tied up by the insurgency in the Vale precluded the opponent's attack advantage.

'That advantage, that Pakistan had accreted at the expense of our blood and misery,' another one interjects to deliver a gavel strike punchline of the discussion.

So what did this insurgency achieve, apart from tearing our social fabric apart? How come our political sentiment got seconded to the strategic interests of the Pakistani establishment? Somebody voices his question. Multiple voices ring out around the table. 'Day in and day out, they kept the pot boiling to their own advantage and had no qualms in undermining the ceasefire announcement of 2000, when some political advantage could have been gained through negotiations and perhaps the tragedies of 2008 and 2010 been averted.'

‘But at the same time they could afford to do an about-turn when it suited them after 9/11, leaving us at the mercy of a brutal Indian state apparatus,’ another voice interjects.

I remembered Nazir Gaash the Marxist’s remarks made at his shop-front at around the turn of the millennia. He contended that the immaturity of many who had made their way up the politico ranks had seen them morph into daily wagers working for either country. The separatist lobby’s ineptitude and fears had, in Gaash’s view, ensured the floundering of what should have been the insurgency’s objectives; Kashmir first. Instead, the spawned politics ensured the primacy of Pakistan establishment’s say-so and pursuance of its strategic interest’s of blunting India’s military edge and political hegemony with not much thought given to Kashmiri political interests or achieving its wanted aims. But as everyone knew, it would need much smarter minds at the helm who, beholden to none, would effectively match the wiles and the power of the Indian opponents and the guile of the Pakistani establishment, both of who were flexing their muscles in this new proxy war arena that the Vale had become.

My mind returns to the cold, wet present. The snowflakes falling outside the huge glass windows are fractal, much like our memories, hitting us now and then with an attenuated impact. The smell of coffee and pan-seared trout makes my parotids swell; Ibu is making business calls on an oversized Nokia phone, taking orders, ordering payments. We sip coffee in between the quips. The sounds of a loud conversation grow increasingly nearer. A bunch of men, braggadocio evident in their body language and gait, climb the stairs. The quartet jostles to sit next to the big window opposite to where we are perched. It’s a well-known separatist politician with his lackeys.

They settle down by the glass windows. Nobody among the café’s patrons makes a move or extends an acknowledging hand to the bunch, whose body language now rapidly changes to exhibit puzzled incredulity. Their expectant glances demand juddering curtseys from the many faces around.

Even as we smoke and sip coffee, the quartet prattles loudly, their withering glances seeming to berate everyone around for refusing to acknowledge the presumed thraldom that is owed to them. My guess is that our crossed legs are being seen as an exhibition of ‘right in your face’ insouciance directed at them.

But then who gives a damn. Rather than making noises and empty phone calls and referring to themselves in the third person, these men should introspect and realize that while they may be claimants to our society's inveterate political sentiment, they don't embody or personify it and that a quarter century later, there is a generational change and a dissonance borne of cynicism and fatigue.

Ibu's ever-genial nods hide the deep pain he has endured personally. I remember him younger, twenty-odd years back, trembling and tearful, sitting in his crowded kitchen next to the muddied corpse of his elder brother, who had been garrotted to death: reasons unknown. There were speculations though, that his elder though emotionally volatile sibling, himself a militant, had stumbled into a situation where he was unable to discern whose side some of the guys he knew in the underground were batting or working for. He blurted his damning reservations in an unguarded moment and paid the price. Maybe there were no reasons back then. His sibling's killing transformed Ibu. A college student by then, he changed thoroughly after the incident. He brooded a lot, ate very little and slept little as if something weighed heavily on his shoulders. When he emerged, from the bereavement phase, he appeared indifferent and distant, as if he had cultivated a second nature overnight.

Rebelliousness was deeply embedded in the minds of the Kashmiri populace through decades of political mobilization passed from father to sons. Before the war started and the rumours of it abounded, everyone peddled the paradigm of the Red Army in Afghanistan being reprised here. The seizure of weapons in the years preceding the conflict added a machismo element to the traditional self-image of quintessential contrarians who had stared the power of the state in the face for long without arms. Ibu and I saw its aftermath, something akin to the El Salvador of the 1980s. The stressed environs raked by war and violence created a feeling of mind-numbing solitude, though not individualization.

We walk out of the café, having finishing our meal. In the falling snow, Ibu walks in front, our shoes hugging the concrete path abutting the wooden thicket fence meant to secure privacy for the swimming pool from overly curious café patrons. On the way to the parking lot I loudly wonder why the quartet was so pissed off and insistent on being acknowledged. Ibu tells me to 'forget about it', in an imitative rendition of Johnny Depp's famed

Donnie Brasco punchline. He has been practising it long, and blames his stilted English pronunciation for its inaccurate rendering.

I understand his voiced chagrin, which isn't entirely different from mine.

The tumult and turmoil of the war and the collective trauma that it inflicted on us, along with the ironies it forged and the new social rungs it produced, should have at least put forth figures like Martin McGuiness or Gerry Adams, or their equivalents, who would practice astute politics, not the symbolic sham bred on pompous platitudes prevalent here.

The overbearing honchos we encountered in the café know that their lives hold little meaning outside the conflict. No wonder they are pathologically obsessed with their self-perceived celebrity status.

The political unfruitfulness of the 2008 and 2010 street agitations, which claimed hundreds of young lives, stand as stark reminders of the irrelevance of their still-rooted-in-the-1980s exposition of Kashmiri political sentiment whose strong ethno-confessional undertow and international stature, requires a high degree of political statesmanship and political acumen to see through a light at the end of the tunnel solution acceptable to everyone. But then according an acceptance of their ineptitude bred in the Petridish of unabashedly parvenu displays precludes them from being astute enough to build the sort of moral authority and political stature necessary to negotiate something akin to a 'Good Friday' agreement to end the violence.

On the other side of the political fence, venality perpetuates a police state profoundly vulgarized by its unbridled exercise of power that constantly stifles a populace suffering decades of violent political and social control. Its deepened overtones of perpetual humiliation are directed at us: We who live within its ill-defined adumbrate. During the 2010 agitation, watching a TV interview featuring a local minister and Asadudin Owaisi, a visiting member of Parliament from Hyderabad—who unlike the local politicians vociferously raised his voice to protest the unabated killing of hundred-odd young demonstrators—made me realize that the wherewithal and stature of local mainstream politicians—whose voices rarely seem to venture beyond euphemism and clichéd speeches—is inherently tied to the perpetuation of the prevalent perverse status quo; consequently, they lack both a sense of posterity and morality.

All around I sense anger, refusing to dissipate, seeping deep down somewhere, camouflaged, seeking to ignite the next tinder pile. Everybody seems resentful inside while leading humdrum lives. As in the past before the war, the youngsters gather every Friday and now and then clash with the police and paramilitaries with metronomic regularity. My greatest fear: The next generation growing up knowing nothing but violence and killing, and coming of age to handle a Kalashnikov while still being ineligible to apply for a driving licence.

The fallen snow has acquired a powdery texture. In the snowy chill, swarms of birds are comfortably ensconced in the numerous chinar trees dotting the lane leading to the hotel, Broadway. Their incessant chirps harken the end of their sojourns for the day. The road and the parking are laden white and wet. We walk to the car and I take the wheel. Near the gates of the lot, my iPod starts shuffles again playing Midnight Oil's *Dead Heart*. Ibu listens to the song's lyrics, and then nods his head pensively to give me a regretful smile. I declutch and negotiate the car's passage on to the cold wet snow-swept asphalt streets. The car's headlights light up the bendy traffic lanes, which play us tricks even as they conjoin to lose themselves in the Nalla Maar Road; its familiarity beckoning me to follow its serpentine trail even as its shrapnel-evoke pocked landmarks half-erased mimeographed memories of the times gone by. An accrued everyman history waits at every corner, holding out its arms as if waiting for a new redemptive morrow. I have been here before; unsure whether that morning will see the light of the day, but whatever happens I know in my heart for sure: By sundown Downtown will again be ours!

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